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The Dissociation of Suzumiya Haruhi

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Prologue

Methods employed to detect changes in seasons varies with the people doing so. For me, the easiest way about that would be through observing the tendencies of my calico cat, Shamisen.

When Shamisen stops sneaking into my bedding in the middle of the night, I would know that the few months of spring, the most appraised of the four seasons in the region, has arrived. But compared to cats, plants possess the same skill to a greater, and often awe-inspiring, extent. The cherry blossoms blooming everywhere appears to be ready to gradually wither in accordance with the timetable they had worked out. The sky of early April is as clear and blue as one colored by crayons. The sun, as if preparing for summer, spilled its golden glow over the lands with all its might. However, the winds that blow down from the mountains continue to carry a bit of chill, reminding me of the altitude of this city I inhabit.

I, with nothing to do, raised my head and looked up towards the blue sky and mentioned the following softly.

"It's spring already, huh…"

Making such a comment can be fully attributed to my boredom. That is why I did not expect a reply from anyone. But the person beside me, despite knowing full well of this fact, felt compelled to reply anyway.

"Undoubtedly, it is spring right now. To the students, it is also the start of both the academic and calendar year. My heart feels it is the start of a clean slate as well."

His surprisingly refreshing tone is appropriate for spring, so that is still all right. If it is used during summer, it would only make one feel warm. As for winter… the only person I wish that would speak to me like this would be Asahina-san, and her alone.

I am not too sure if he realized that my heart was no longer set on the conversation, and that all that was left there was my physical body, but he would continue his speech regardless of any interruptions.

"This is my second time welcoming spring since I entered high school. I do not know whether 'spring has finally arrived' or 'spring has arrived again so quickly' would more accurately convey the point I am trying to make here."

I wonder what there is to be so confused about. Were this in English, he could always use 'yet' to connect the phrases together. People cannot possibly remember all of what they do all the time. Thus, when one tries to remember them again, many of these past events appear to have past as quickly as a whiff of smoke. And because events that will happen have not happened yet, it is impossible to judge how quickly or slowly they pass. As for events happening now, I just have to use the amount of joy experienced during the event to judge how slow or fast it happened. Why not think about this in the viewpoint of clocks; don't they rely on counting seconds to measure the flow of time, while producing ticking sounds to remind people of this fact? Although

occasionally one doesn't remember actually turning the alarm clock off, sometimes it just ends up not ringing, angering me to the extent of throwing the alarm clock at the wall. Such incidents happen most often on Monday mornings.

"As you have said, the hands of a clock are one of those few things that can objectively remind us of events. But to humans, it may not be just a hand on the clock. What is most important is what have we done or thought about with that time."

"Uh huh."

I stopped inspecting the changing shapes of the clouds and turned to face the person beside me.

Presented in front of my eyes is a handsome face with an unfading smile, reminding us of the presence of its owner - Koizumi Itsuki. The smile can be described to be scenery as normal as the contrail of a plane that just flew across the sky: not too glaring to the eye to prevent you from looking at it. Realizing that staring at his face any more would not have much purpose anyway, I turned my head back to face the front.

But,

"Talking about my personal feelings…"

While views of the courtyard reflected into my retina. I told Koizumi with his intense gaze focused on me.

"…'spring has FINALLY arrived' is more appropriate!"

My eyes followed the first-year students who had amassed in small groups on the courtyard and the North High uniforms they wore. My mind replayed the memorable scenes from last year, making me wonder if second-year students one year ago looked at first-years with the same intent as I do now. I guess so. What an amazing feeling.

Due to the school district assignments I ended up in North High and met Suzumiya Haruhi, the walking enigma. Before even getting acquainted with the situation, I was put through her crazy self-introduction. While I was still wondering "What is wrong with this person?", I was dragged into her world and forced to join a mysterious organization known as the SOS Brigade. Thanks to this, I met real-life aliens, espers, and time travelers, all of whom aren't even supposed to exist. It would be fine if it had stopped at that, but I was dragged into paranormal events one after another, and had to go on crazy sprees with Haruhi as well. My, my. My life experiences must have increased exponentially just in the past year. In fact, I think I would have no problems defeating those bosses in games with all these experiences.

"Habit is really powerful."

The slope that I had to conquer daily on my quest to school had become such a habit that nowadays, I find myself in bodily contact with my bed until the last possible moment. However, I am not the only one to have changed tremendously; Haruhi has also undergone this process, like a carp would from just jumping over the hoop to becoming a dragon.

I really wanted to use a camera to capture the Haruhi of this moment, and then take it back for the Haruhi of one year ago to have a look at, while at the same time making up a story filled with the kinds of descriptions found in proverbial stories, telling her that this would be her in a year.

But even if this were possible, I am afraid I would not want to do so.

"I agree with this too."

Koizumi squinted his eyes and raised his lips slightly upward, arms crossed in front of his chest, legs resting on the table.

"I am talking about habits. Looking at humans scattered everywhere across the globe, we see that they can adapt to their environments easily. One basically only needs some time to get used to his or her new surroundings. But recently I'm starting to wonder if this could be a bad thing? Once one gets used to an environment, the ability to adapt to sudden changes would decrease as well."

What exactly are you talking about? If you are referring to Haruhi, I believe that the number of unexpected occurrences far exceeds those that are otherwise.

"Hmm, you are right…"

Koizumi revealed a seldom-seen expression that could not be described in words. This guy often rambles on and on, even if the other party did not ask him to. If I asked him anything I would probably have to sit through another load of his jargon yet again.

I shook my head without talking, trying to divert Koizumi's attention away, before looking in another direction.

"……"

On the topic of remaining silent, the back of a petite person as quiet as a statue of Buddha in a monastery enters my field of vision, wearing the female North High sailor uniform, her short hair wavering ever so slightly along with the wind.

Needless to say, this is Nagato Yuki, the secret weapon of the SOS Brigade - though President of the Literature Club would be the actual, canonical title for her. Like Koizumi and myself, Nagato had brought her table and chair out onto the courtyard a distance away from us, silently reading her book. The title reads "Philosophers, Artists, Musicians, and their Interrelationship", and it is as thick as a brick.

I turned and looked at the clubroom block of the school. Asahina-san, after being dragged out of the clubroom by Haruhi traveling at the speed of light, still hasn't returned. Actually, I don't really mind, since it might turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

"If this is the case…"

I haven't introduced the current situation yet, so let's have a quick one. The new school term had been in progress for a few days, and curriculum time has ended. Today, we brought our tables and chairs out into a corner of the courtyard. Most, though not all, second and third-year students have gathered at the school field as well.

I could barely make out the backs of the members of the Computer Research Society. A few computers rested on the long tables in front of them, the screens showing either the contents of some CD-ROM or CG graphic. Unlike "The Day of Sagittarius III", what is on the screen has a particular medieval feel to it, resembling some fortune-telling tarot cards, making you wonder if the president of the Computer Research Society has suffered brain damage to be exhibiting something like this. I spotted the newly promoted third-year president in the mix, though I am not sure if he is still holding onto that post. Although these things do not really concern me, I guess I'm just feeling curious. I think I'll verify this with Nagato later on.

Directing my vision elsewhere, I saw a few unknown clubs gathering in another corner. I'd never even heard the names of some of them before. Seeing all these, I gradually realized that what I am doing now is incredibly pointless. I just don't understand why we have to participate in such activities.

If I am forced to give a reason for this, I think it would be for Nagato.

I took yet another look at the bookish girl.

At a distance not too far away from where Nagato is silently sitting, the words "Literature Club" are printed on a piece of paper, stuck onto a table with Scotch tape. That piece of paper moved gently along with the spring wind which blew Nagato's short hair, unblessed by any salon. Her intense gaze never once left the book, as if trying to disconnect herself from the outside world.

I guess everyone should understand by now.

This is a time for the various extra-curricular clubs to recruit new members, as well as to showcase their works. This is exactly what is happening over here for culture-related clubs in the courtyard. Sports-related clubs are holding similar events at the sports hall or the school field. People would approach the band automatically, even if there was no recruitment exercise. As for arts clubs and the like, they have set up their booths in their respective clubrooms, much like fishermen setting up nets and waiting for the fish to get themselves caught. This leaves only the clubs that would probably not even be known without some form of advertising, such as the various societies, in the courtyard.

I expected most of the readers to understand this without any explanation, so I did not really mention it until now. Naturally, members of the SOS Brigade have been promoted as well. Haruhi, Nagato, Koizumi, and I will be entering our second year, and Asahina-san her third. Now that I must bid farewell to the memory-filled classroom of 1-5, I cannot say that I would not miss the class, but even as I step into my second year, I doubt much will change. Oh, I might as well mention that Haruhi and I have once again been sorted into the same class. When I stepped into the second-year classroom after the opening ceremony this year, the person sitting behind me was, as expected, Haruhi. That arrogant face, filled with mixed emotions and grins which always seems to be hiding some evil ploy, remained unchanged as well.

"What's this?"

Haruhi looked on with her usual look of unconcern.

"It's as if there's no change from the first year! I expected some earth-shattering change to happen!"

Although I wanted to ask her whether this sentence meant she was happy or unhappy about the outcome, at this moment I have the same sentiments as well. In 2-5, other than Haruhi and me, Taniguchi and Kunikida are still around too. Even our homeroom teacher is still Okabe-sensei, known for his care towards students. Although there are some classmates whose names I don't know despite remembering having seeing them before, the most important thing is that they had all came from 1-5. I also heard that all the students who decided to study in the science stream were just enough for a class, and thus 2-8 had been allocated solely for this purpose. Students from 1-8 were then disbanded and split into the other seven classes. Of course there are some who are being needlessly shuffled from one class to another. Okabe-sensei's purpose in making us introduce ourselves again is probably to accommodate these people who have been forced to evacuate and join us.

Obviously, I doubted the authenticity of this sorting exercise, and approached those who seemed suspicious no matter how you look at it, and who had the ability to manipulate such events at will.

"Did you arrange this?"

Their replies were:

"No." Nagato replied monotonously. Miraculously, she added, "It is just a coincidence."

"We did not do anything. I guess it is the decision of the school. The 'Organization' has decided not to question this event any further." Koizumi concluded with a bitter smile.

"I suppose it is coincidental."

Seems they are serious about it.

Although in my heart I know of a lady who has the ability to change a coincidence into a necessity, but I shall not elaborate on that further.

Does this mean that Asahina-san and Tsuruya-san were sorted into the same class as well? If it is so, there is a possibility that the Tsuruya family is behind this. But I have no idea how I could ask her appropriately even if that is true. Anyway, despite differences in level and classes, everyone would still gather in the same place after school after all.

What matters to me now, or rather should matter to me now, are other things. It could likely be on the mind of every new student as well.

I already know aliens, as well as a time-traveling senior. I also cannot deny that the male whom I talked to the most often throughout the past year is an esper. But…

On that day, that moment, when Haruhi made that introduction speech that shocked all of 1-5, of all the groups she mentioned there is still one that has not appeared.

Sliders.

Even though I do not wish for such people to exist, and the only one who would feel that they are missing is that girl, now that we have all been successfully promoted, the first-year seat is left empty…

"My, my."

I shook my head about for a while, trying to relax my shoulders, and began my mission of observing the first-years.

"Once anyone with potential is spotted, his or her name must be recorded immediately!" This is the instruction of our beloved leader. But Haruhi failed to mention how potential is defined, and how people with it could be spotted.

I might as well go off-topic once again to talk about the self-introduction during the first lesson in 2-5. Haruhi did not repeat what she said last year but instead used a tone that was unenthusiastic yet clear, and proclaimed loudly that:

"I am Suzumiya Haruhi, leader of the SOS Brigade. I have spoken my bit!"

Her smiling face gave the impression of a fearless person. She sat down on her chair again after pulling my hair for a bit.

It seems as if she is trying to say that this is enough.

But to the entire class, this is indeed enough. For in this entire school, there can't be anyone who doesn't know the two terms 'Suzumiya Haruhi' and 'the SOS Brigade' by now.

Even if…

I carelessly stared at the legs of the people sporting the uniforms that they would wear from year one through year three, wearing the shoes branded with the school logo, walking around the courtyard.

Even if there is, he or she should be one of these newcomers.

It is the time frame when the cherry blossoms just start showing their leaves. While Koizumi, Nagato, and I tried to waste our time away, a figure emerged out of the hordes of students moving around. The sight of the students automatically making way for this person reminds me of Moses and The Exodus.

"Long time since we last met."

The Student Council president stopped in front of our booth, speaking in a cold tone.

How un-coincidental that I just met you recently. It's not that easy to forget the expression that was smeared over your face during the speech you took so long to make in today's opening ceremony.

"Cut the crap short. What is it?"

I watched the president unnecessarily adjust his spectacles much like you would often see in television dramas, and then, showing an expression of a leader unhappy with his disciples, he continued.

"Where is the commander? I originally came over to complain about one or two things, and yet she is missing."

"Well, where do you think she went? I am neither the secretary nor the manager of that girl; movements of a classmate as busy as her are nearly impossible to track down."

"That cannot be helped then, so I guess asking you is fine. What exactly are you all doing here?"

I had originally expected Koizumi to reply for me if I kept my mouth shut. Who could have known that this stereotypical good guy of the SOS Brigade, as if having caught some spring syndrome, would remain seated at the back smiling happily to himself.

"Isn't it obvious after just taking a single glance?"

I replied without paying much attention.

His Excellency stared at me with an expression as cold as a metal mask at my lame reply.

“This is of course obvious by just a glance. As long as one knows where this place is and who you people are, the answer will reveal itself rather easily. As to why I asked such a question, it is because I am worried you all will pull some stunt that is beyond my imagination. It is indeed nothing much. Am I right to guess that you can predict what I will say after this?”

That is because your actions would never differ from what we have planned. If Haruhi were here as well, I’m sure this issue could be settled much quicker.

Wait. Since Haruhi is not around, why is the president still displaying his airy attitude? Isn’t this current president purely a puppet controlled by the “Organization”? Or should we say that such attitude is maintained only because others were looking? But we are currently in a deserted corner of the courtyard, and if others are not deliberately listening out for anything, there should not be any worries about us being spied on. Nagato, who is sitting about a few meters away, would probably be within earshot, but surely it doesn’t matter even if she does hear our conversation? The only things that she should not be hearing should come only from the higher ranks of the CIA and NORAD I guess.

I had no original intention of messing about with the student council president, but he continued staring at me with his cold eyes, and after twisting his lips about a little, moved his gaze away and spoke in a serious and deep tone.

“We shall ignore the incident here. We are nearly done inspecting all the culture-related clubs by now. Kimidori-kun, why don’t you move on to the field first? I will join you there later.”

“Sure.”

Only after hearing this short reply did I realize who the one standing beside the president had been all along. I nearly let out a scream, but luckily I managed to force it back down into the depths of my throat.

“…Kimidori-senpai?” I asked, suddenly enlightened.

“Yes.” She replied politely before bowing.

Before hearing her voice, I did not realize that she was actually around. This fact deeply surprised me. It is as if she had been part of the president’s shadow all along, before materializing after opening her mouth. In fact, I felt as if she’d appeared out of thin air.

The first-ever client of the SOS Brigade, as well as the ex-girlfriend of the president of the computer research society, now the secretary of the student council, Emiri Kimidori. After she gave a refined smile, like those seen in portraits of well brought-up ladies, she gave a bow as a sign of greeting. I stood there for a while, stunned, before doing the same.

My, my, so is this the reason the president is displaying such attitude? Does this mean she had hidden her actual character from him? I personally thought this was not too necessary.

However, the secretary and the president always appeared together as a duo. What exactly is happening here? Shouldn't they give the treasurer a chance to appear once in a while as well?

"It is possible if you wish." The president adjusted his spectacles once again. "Even if our treasurer had anything to say, it would be towards the president of your club seated over there."

Actually both Koizumi and I heard the news as well. Last year, before the spring break, the student council had actually organized a meeting regarding the distribution of funds for the various clubs, and one of them involved the Literature Club. Although there is only one member, it is a legitimate club after all, and the president of the club actually attended the meeting. Of course, it is Nagato who attended the meeting as the president and not Haruhi. While Haruhi seemed genuinely interested in participating until the very last minute and suggested attending together with, or even in place of, Nagato, if she ever attended that meeting, it would surely lead to widespread chaos once the news of her illegally occupying the room of another club was made known.

After much begging by Koizumi and me, Haruhi finally agreed and sent Nagato off with an expression as if she were sending a hostage to the enemy in a war.

Nagato returned about an hour later, holding in her hands the funds granted for use for the club. This is quite an exception for a nearly-dormant club with only one member.

According to various sources, nothing was done that would affect the outcome of the funding. All Nagato did was sit quietly and stare intently at the president of the student council. Often such meetings would be filled with debates over the amount of funding provided to each club, but this year set a new record, for everything went rather smoothly.

Seemingly pleased with himself, the president said:

"The meeting is actually just a meeting in name. The funding provided to each club has already been predetermined by Kimidori-kun and me. But the Literature Club is the only club excluded from this system. Ah, since we have already reached this stage, I shall not comment further. As long as you people use the funds assigned on meaningful activities, I will keep quiet. Otherwise do not blame me for nagging. After all, everything is already set in stone."

Kimidori-senpai, who had been observing silently from the side, suddenly chipped in.

"In that case, I shall make a move first, president."

"Sorry to trouble you, Kimidori-kun."

Kimidori-senpai bowed at me once again before departing with a smile of a plant in a nursery, leaving a scent of lilies behind.

During this period of time, there was no visual contact of any kind between Kimidori and Nagato. In fact, they may have already perfected the art of communicating without the need for words. I

say this because Nagato never once raised her head from her book while Kimidori-senpai was around.

“In that case, I guess we should be moving onto the actual topic.”

The president took off his spectacles and played with them in his fingers.

“It is useless talking about this without that girl around. When is she coming back?”

I guess it should be soon. She’s only helping Asahina-san change; it shouldn’t take up too much time.

“I might as well wait for her here then.”

I keep having a feeling that the president that stood in front of me is starting to exude the air of someone in power more strongly than a while ago, as if he had been president for three years.

“I originally thought that this student council work would be very troublesome…”

The president laughed a bit after saying that, his real side finally showing.

“But now that I’ve been at it for a while, it’s beginning to get interesting. When facing the various teachers and administrative staff as a president…”

He suddenly reached out his hand and slapped himself on the forehead.

“I slowly forgot which side is the real me. Actually, changing to become a person of different character is not such a bad thing either.”

“I hope that you will not become engulfed by that disguised side.”

Koizumi finally decided to open his golden mouth.

“Don’t ever let the mask you are wearing become the real you. Tomb raiders becoming mummified themselves, and people emulating cats becoming real cats, are both common events these days.”

“Tomb raiders trapped in a maze will at most become corpses to be displayed to warn others, not a mummy themselves. We should also not forget that cats have much shorter lives than humans.”

The president revealed the smile of a predator and returned the spectacles to his face after wiping them with the sleeve of his uniform.

“You don’t have to worry about this, Koizumi; I will do a beautiful job. But…”

After putting his spectacles back on, the president went through a metamorphosis and became the perfect student council president everyone had come to expect. No wonder he pondered which is the real him.

"Keeping a leash on that psychopathic girl is your job."

Out of the student council president's sight, the president of our brigade appeared at the exit of the clubrooms block. Her face carried a look that is seen in all animals upon the arrival of spring. Beside her is a fairy exuding the radiance of the warm spring sun, the maid that is reserved for SOS Brigade use only.

Haruhi carried a cardboard box made of corrugated fiberboard in one hand and held onto Asahina-san with the other, smiling as brightly as a Cheshire cat. However, the moment she saw the president, her eyebrows rose immediately.

"Hey you!"

Haruhi approached the president in large steps, totally ignoring the screams of Asahina-san, who she dragged along with her.

"It's just like I expected! You came over to make trouble for us while I wasn't around, right? However, I don't think we committed any crimes that would incur the wrath of the student council, did we?"

Regarding this, I think everyone has differing views. What exactly are you doing here at the courtyard?

"Ah, President-sempai…"

Blinking her eyes like a European robin, Asahina-san is in her maid costume. This does not really matter, since it's as normal as green bristlegrass growing on grasslands.

"Hey, Haruhi, why are you…" I finally started speaking "…dressed up like that?"

Haruhi proudly puffed her chest up.

1 An elaborate, traditional Chinese wear. Nowadays it is usually worn usually during special festivals such as the Lunar New Year.

"Do you have a problem with that? Is there anything wrong with wearing a cheongsam[1]?"

Like she mentioned, Haruhi is wearing a dark red cheongsam, decorated with a finely-stitched dragon. The cheongsam's high cut revealed her supple and long legs. What's more, the dress is sleeveless.

Since she had made such a huge din upon entering the courtyard, the attention of everyone within it is now focused on her. Asahina-san, surprised by the sudden amount of attention on us, was so greatly embarrassed that she fumbled around trying to cover up her assets. If it is possible, I would have really hoped that I could have enjoyed such a sight by myself. Who cares about laws prohibiting such behaviour?

"If you were at a fancy dress party, of course there would be no problem. But this is the school, and here you are, committing such atrocities right in front of many first-years! Can't you just think before doing something?"

Facing away from me, Haruhi replied…

"Aren't I thinking now? That is why I appeared in this costume! I originally intended to wear the bunny girl costume, but since I don't want you all to complain, I settled for this instead. I'm already changing to fit your demands. You people should be eternally grateful!"

Haruhi displayed a dirty look on her face. She tried to point a finger at the president, but discovering that both her hands were full, quickly let go of Asahina-san and left the cardboard box on the table before doing so.

"You should be feeling eternally grateful!"

She repeated the statement.

Unfortunately, the president is not some saint.

"What kind of gratitude am I supposed to show here? As the student council president, and regulator of the image of the school, I refuse to accept your dress code! I also wanted to ask you if you have ever heard of the idiom, 'the pot calling the kettle black' or something similar?"

"What about it? I have heard of it before."

"No, I'm just trying to prevent the student body, especially the pure and innocent males, who have come here with confidence in their future, from having their basic instincts aroused because of your dress code. I simply cannot turn a blind eye to such situations."

"What do you mean by that? This is so funny. Listen carefully, for those dirty-minded people, even the school uniform or the PE attire will arouse them anyway! Are you suggesting that we might as well come to school naked?"

Everyone has a limit to how much anger they can tolerate, and it seems the president is finally reaching his, prompting him to reply:

"Talking to you is a waste of my breath."

“Does it matter? I hope you people can learn to respect the autonomy of the students. Can’t we even decide what we can wear after school? I’m only going to wear this after school not in class or the way home, so does it really matter? Don’t you agree with me, Mikuru-chan?”

“Eh? Ah… I agree not to wear this during commuting at all costs, because this costume is too embarrassing…”

Asahina-san slightly shook her head and then, as if being intimidated by the striking appearance of Haruhi’s cheongsam, quickly turned her gaze away before letting out a small sigh. Are you thinking of wearing the cheongsam too?

But then again, compared to last year, when Haruhi and Asahina were stationed at the school gate in bunny girl costumes giving out fliers, this is a great improvement, seeing how much less skin is shown this time round. But, as second and third-year students, performing cosplay in front of the first-years is still somewhat out of the line. What’s more, it does not seem to serve any real purpose, so it should not be encouraged.

“Who says it doesn’t serve any purpose? Of course it does. Look, aren’t we attracting a lot of attention now?”

I’m trying to say that you’re attracting people’s attention for no good reason!

Haruhi looked at me with a face of displeasure. I suddenly felt as if my emotions resembled those of a shrimp sensing the presence of a whale nearby. However Haruhi jumped behind Nagato, who is silently reading the book.

“Kyon, did you forget what we came here for? I will give you two seconds; you better remember the answer by then.”

Regarding this…

“Okay, time’s up.”

Haruhi only gave me half a second before declaring this to be the case, and shook her finger before bringing it to the shoulders of Nagato, who remained completely immobile, as if she’d been frozen.

“We are here to help Yuki, not to recruit people for the SOS Brigade. You’d better understand this properly!”

The last sentence was directed at the president of the Literature Club. Nagato, who was dragged into the conversation for no reason, lightly flipped to the next page of her book.

“Hmph.”

Adamance is one of the current student council president's positive qualities. He raised his finger and pushed his spectacles back into position and replied.

"Suzumiya-kun, I thus conclude that despite not being a member of the Literature Club, you are helping to fight for its survival?"

Thanks for condensing Haruhi's words into ones that others could understand easily.

"Yup."

Haruhi raised her chest even higher and said, while pointing towards Koizumi and my table,

"Look, these two are only sitting here doing nothing, right? There is absolutely no sign that reads SOS Brigade. And Kyon also appears to be more retarded than normal as he did not realise spring has already arrived."

The last statement is unnecessary.

"Ah."

The president raised his chin, giving a look of being deep in thought.

"In that case, Suzumiya-kun, what is the signboard-looking thing inside the cardboard box you were carrying just now?"

"A signboard."

Haruhi fished out the signboard made of wood from the cardboard box without much hesitation.

The signboard is comprised of a rectangular slab of wood with a thinner, rectangular piece of wood running in the perpendicular direction to act as the handle. It has already been painted white and the black text on the signboard read "Literature Club". Menial jobs such as the cutting and painting of said wood blocks were of course done by me, as you probably expected.

"Take a look, take a look, isn't 'Literature Club' written on the top? This will be carried by Mikuru-chan later on. If we didn't do anything, Yuki wouldn't bother to do anything about it anyway."

That's true. Talks arranged within curriculum time for first-years to be introduced to the various clubs and societies had begun days ago. The reason the SOS Brigade is uninvited is because it is not even a recognized club in the first place, and thus it is impossible for us to participate. Thus, the only one among us invited to attend this event was the president of the Literature Club, Nagato Yuki. As Nagato stood on stage alone, she spoke all the way until the final second with the enthusiasm of a weatherwoman reporting the weather of the world's various major cities about a thesis titled "Neurological studies on the incomplete transmission of information and feelings through words", which was assigned to the Literature Club. The thesis failed to even

mention the word ‘club’, much less ‘Literature Club’. It is also heard that before Nagato was even halfway through the thesis, most first-years had already became slaves of the sleeping devil. Combined with Nagato’s tone that sounded more like she was chanting scriptures than giving a speech, those who were originally interested in joining the Literature Club no doubt purged such thoughts from their minds immediately. Nagato Yuki can be really scary sometimes.

However, Nagato did not seem to mind at all. Even if we left her alone today, I’m afraid she would only stay cooped in the clubroom reading books. The one who insisted on dragging her out here is Haruhi.

Something as fun as recruiting new members would never be able to escape being detected by the antennas installed near the top of Haruhi’s head.

Although it has been mentioned previously that the SOS Brigade is an unrecognized society, it is also an illegal society in school that continues operations, similar to an underground group. Obviously we are not allowed to recruit members openly. If it were the Haruhi of the past, she might have just got on with it without giving much thought, but because starting this year there are no corners of the school the shining eyes of the student council president cannot reach, how can we still have fun during the day of the event?

The light bulb above Haruhi’s head lit up. In the end, we were reorganized as volunteers to the Literature Club in an emergency exercise, and in this season when every minute is worth its weight in gold, forced to spend one day wandering aimlessly in the courtyard of the school. Of course, this is how things look from the outside. There is definitely more than meets the eye.

It seems that this problem-student-turned-student-council-president realized that as well.

“Can you flip the signboard over to let me have a look as well?”

“Sure, why not?”

Haruhi gave a smile and turned the sign over. Behind the tagline “Literature Club”… is still “Literature Club”, and absolutely no mention of the SOS Brigade of any kind anywhere.

“Seems to me you people are well prepared. Okay then, what you had just mentioned is not unreasonable after all.”

The president pushed his spectacles back up again.

“Although a compromise is not in my character, I do not wish to cause unnecessary trouble for either of us. You all can stay here and continue doing whatever advertising you all want. But do not cause trouble for other clubs, do you understand? I am very busy surveying the event. Do not forget that forced membership is strictly forbidden.”

You should tell this to the sports clubs. After all, this is only an average high school; every club is bound to be anxious due to the lack of talent.

“You are right. I will go talk to them later. Before I leave, I still have one last question to ask. Even if I ignore your recruitment of members for the Literature Club, what do you all plan to do after the end of the recruitment exercise? Hand over the room to them?”

“I believe that is not of your concern.”

The talk about a lack of respect in the tone of high school students is so true. The president turned his head and looked at Haruhi after hearing this. “Hmph.”, though it seems he cannot be bothered with that.

“Oh. This is all I wanted to ask. In that case, see you people next time.”

After completing his sentence, he admired the costumes of Haruhi and Asahina for a moment before going off to chase after Kimidori-senpai.

What exactly was he here for? Doesn’t he realize the more you tell Haruhi not to do something, the more she would desire to attempt it? Just look at her now, she is happily laughing over nothing in particular.

“It seems we were quite successful. It’s perfect, really perfect.”

Haruhi, upon confirming that the president was finally out of sight, planted the sign into the ground and tore off the thin layer of wooden foil with the words ‘Literature Club’ to reveal ‘SOS Brigade’.

I am not too sure which day, but back in May last year, this club named the “Spreading Excitement All Over the World with Suzumiya Haruhi’s Brigade” was set up. The name hasn’t been changed since then; it’s been largely smooth-sailing.

There are more than handmade signboards inside the cardboard box Haruhi brought along.

After forcing the signboard into the hands of Asahina, she continued taking things out of the cardboard box while the skirt of the cheongsam flitted along with her movements.

First an LCD monitor, then a DVD player, various cables and their connectors, as well as the newly-bought notebook and stationery.

“We have to get this set up quickly.”

Haruhi turned towards me.

“Get them installed and play this.”

There are no electrical outlets in the courtyard, but Haruhi had already anticipated that. Refusing to obey her instructions now wouldn’t do any good, so I dragged the cables towards the direction of the computer research society according to her demands.

“Excuse me, could we borrow your power source for a moment?”

“Of course.”

The person replying to me is the president of the computer research society. My suspicions are confirmed. Seems that he is still the president of the society, at least according to the official pass hung in front of his chest.

“My members refuse to let me go.” The president seemed pretty proud of that fact. “So I decided to stay as the president for the first term. But I have planned for the future as well. In fact, I am thinking of nurturing…”

If what you are going to say is going to be any longer, please keep it for the next time. Your members may be motivated by what you said and decide to let you step down early.

“Ah, actually…”

The president lowered his voice somewhat, and covered his mouth while saying the following as if he was doing a tongue twister.

“I hope Nagato-san can join our society, and maybe become the president as well. From all the people I have seen, her knowledge of computers seems to be the best, she’s definitely a genius. No matter what happens, if any bug or system errors occur, the magical touch of Nagato-san is able to solve the problem. Although she only drops by once in a while, she never fails to surprise us every time. There is a DIY-ed computer for her exclusive use in our club room, and she managed to develop a new operating system within moments that managed to shock even the best software developers. But no matter how we look at the source, we just can’t comprehend it, it seems that only she has the ability to do so. All our software and hardware worked perfectly with the operating system. It is a real gem. As for what exactly the code is based on…”

No matter how much you tell me, all I can tell you is that Nagato does possess such an ability. You should approach her yourself for any other matters, for I believe she will teach you. But I personally feel that what she would say could probably be incomprehensible to earthlings like you and me.

I swung the connector of the extension cable while thinking about the fact that this third-year president actually allowed us to borrow their power source just because of this.

I continued swinging the end of the extension cable around. Noticing this, the third year president willingly handed me the socket of their extension cable. Haruhi’s project to assimilate the Computer Research Society into the SOS brigade as a branch office has so far been successful and is gradually developing. If we don’t put a stop to it, the project will grow into the “All Humans are Members of the SOS Brigade” project, and she might even complete it before desertification spreads throughout the world. I trust Homo Sapiens aren’t foolish enough to allow such a plan to be carried out.

It would be better if it is this way, especially for Koizumi, and so I turned my gaze towards him, but that esper boy did not seem as happy as I had expected. He revealed a pensive look, crossing his fingers together and using that to support his head on the table. What trouble is it this time? He squinted as he watched Nagato, increasing my worry.

What is it? It couldn't be that the moods of each of the members of the SOS Brigade take turns to become melancholic could it? Stop scaring me. Never mind Nagato and Asahina-san, I originally had 100% confidence that there would not be a day where this could happen to you too…

I do not know if it is because Koizumi saw my shocked face, but he slowly adjusted his gaze towards me and flashed me a smile. Although this decreased my worry, I somehow think there is something fake about this expression.

This guy who entered class 2-9, as if conveyed with a gondola, had the entire class of 1-9 enter alongside him. This should exclude the possibility of any arch-nemeses entering the same class as well, so what exactly is he worrying about?

The current Haruhi is also in a very good emotional state, so it should not be causing Koizumi any headaches either. Or did he catch wind of a pay cut in the "Organization"? If that was the case then it would be great, for you would be as free as me. If Koizumi was already disturbed by some love letters in his shoe locker from first-year girls at the very beginning of the new semester, my sympathy would become as unnecessary as Shamisen's molts. After all, he has as good a face as Haruhi, and if they stood silently, would unconditionally attract attention from people of the opposite sex.

"Kyon, start playing the DVD now!"

Winner of Miss Universe Haruhi waved the signboard while ordering me around, forcing me to get busy again. Koizumi also stood up to help me out. While arranging the various cables for the DVD player and the LCD monitor, Koizumi showed his usual smile, but the impression he gives me is still very odd.

Why do you cast me such a subtle glance? Eye contact from Asahina-san or Nagato is perfectly acceptable due to the implications behind such actions, but unfortunately the feeling is lost when the glance originates from a guy like you.

After much hard work, I finally got the cables in order. I had a feeling that I had enough and ran over to report to Haruhi. Upon hearing that, Haruhi nodded her head happily like a fisherman discovering a school of fish.

"So we shall begin!"

She took out a DVD from the cardboard box and stuffed it into the unwilling mouth of the DVD player before hitting the play button like it was the doorbell of one's own house.

The monitor showed some blurry footage and some familiar music could be heard leaking out of the speakers, floating about in the air.

Asahina-san shivered.

“Ah~”

She let out a deep sigh, and turned her face away from the display with a look of helplessness. The look on her face ignited the masculinity within me.

“Haruhi, turn down the volume! If the president of the student council hears this he will come running back!”

“I’m not afraid of him; in fact I don’t even give two hoots about him!”

Would it kill you to give a hoot?

“I don’t even mind having an open debate here.”

Stop doing such stuff!

“Shut up, stupid Kyon!”

Haruhi quickly squeezed her eyes and mouth into the shape of an inverted triangle.

“You and Koizumi just wait here. I will settle the rest with Mikuru-chan.”

Haruhi stretched her hands out, grabbed Asahina-san’s waist, and pulled her towards herself, maintaining her bright smiling face.

“Kyaa~!”

Asahina-san jumped as Haruhi placed her hand on her waist.

And so Haruhi and the third-year student in the maid costume stuck their faces close and stared at us together as if trying to show off something.

“Listen carefully. If anybody interesting comes by, remember to record their names and classes down and convince them to join us. We are not the movie research society; if anybody runs to us and thinks that we are such a club, chase them away. Understand?”

Haruhi mentioned this before dragging Asahina-san along like a forced parolee around the courtyard to advertise.

“My, my.”

I loosened my shoulders, took out the SOS Brigade sign, hid it behind the chair, and turned to look at the images on the monitor with brightness adjusted to the maximum.

Needless to say, this is the film shot a few months back that, when watched by others, would give them the impression of a waste of electricity and equipment.

“The Revenge of Nagato Yuki Episode 00 - Trailer”.

Before the new school term there is a break that is neither too long nor too short. According to Suzumiya Haruhi’s usual practice, she would obviously not wait for the new school year to come obediently.

I am afraid she has probably been planning for this since the incident with Sakanaka-san’s pet dog, Rousseau. Spring break, compared to the summer and winter break, has much less homework and life could be much more peaceful. But we, as members of the SOS Brigade, are being ordered around nearly daily, and then flying around like a torpedo going to Haruhi’s scheduled destinations.

2 The Japanese traditional custom of enjoying the beauty of flowers, “flower” in this case almost always meaning cherry blossoms. In modern-day Japan, hanami mostly consists of having an outdoor party beneath the sakura during daytime or at night.

Thinking back now, it seems we went to a lot of places. The antique shop, the flea market, visiting Sakanaka-san’s house to take a look at Rousseau to see if he has become better, as well as being invited to Tsuruya-san’s house for Hanami[2], where we sat in her huge garden. My, my, the last one was really interesting. At the snap of the fingers or the clap of a hand, the servants came out of the house with a banquet that had enough food to feed a middle sized African village. That really awed me a little.

No matter what, as long as Haruhi is invited, she will surely be present. Even if she is uninvited, she would not hesitate to join anyway. While inhaling the smell of the fresh air of spring in deep breaths, she continued ordering us about. It is really strange why she doesn’t feel breathless.

Haruhi was particularly interested in filming the sequel to “The Adventures of Asahina Mikuru Episode 00” which we produced for the North High cultural festival last year. Although I am shocked that something which will not even become the main concern of the year becoming one, what is more devastating is that Haruhi, who wasn’t even officially a second-year student, was planning to prepare for the cultural festival of the coming year!

Haruhi once again picked up the loudspeaker and wore the Ultra Director armband, stuffed the video camera which has been hibernating in the corner of the club room somewhere into my hands and proceeded to take off Asahina-san’s clothes herself, prompting Koizumi and me to make a dash for the door.

Although the title has Nagato’s name on it, the protagonist of the story is still Asahina Mikuru. (Eh? Isn’t the protagonist supposed to be Koizumi Itsuki instead?) Because Asahina Mikuru’s

real identity is a battle waitress from the future, Asahina-san is forced to wear that revealing costume again. This is the arrangement of the Ultra Director Suzumiya Haruhi. Nagato continues to wear her school uniform with a witch's hat, black cloak, and a magic wand with a star at one end. Koizumi is still ordered to carry that light reflector board.

What is more convenient is that it is now spring and cherry blossoms are blooming everywhere, allowing us to connect to the previous story easily. I can't help but feel sympathy for the trees along the coastal area of that river that have already bloomed twice in a year.

But why is it a "trailer"? Haruhi gathered us at the club room and said:

"Haven't you guys ever been cheated by a trailer?"

What do you mean by "cheated"? I asked her.

"Like movie trailers. Aren't they run in television commercials before the actual movie starts screening in the cinemas? After watching that, you will go like 'Wow~ very interesting~' right? And then you go watch the movie with great anticipation only to find that it is perfect rubbish? For example…"

Although I feel there is no need to give examples, Haruhi still mentioned the name of an English movie that I have heard before in the past.

"Back when I was watching its trailer I thought it was a funny and interesting movie. In fact, I laughed quite a few times just watching its trailer. The most interesting parts of the movie are already made known even before the movie is screened, and these are the only parts that will attract others' attention. Don't you all agree?"

Even if you tell me all this I still have no idea how to reply. For such complaints, I think it is better if you made a call to the company that produced the movie instead. There is definitely a department that focuses on marketing, and they must surely have very good people there.

"No matter what form of advertising it is, dishing out all the interesting parts before even watching the real thing is really despicable in my opinion. That's why, Kyon!"

Haruhi looked at me with eyes shining as if all the stars in the Milky Way were stuffed inside.

"We must produce the trailer first before considering the actual movie! If it is the trailer, there are no problems making the entire thing exciting because we don't have to worry about the climax at all. We just need to provide more fan-service."

Because of this, before the film was started, the trailer was already being produced. Haruhi hasn't really thought of what to include in the sequel herself. Despite this, she has already planned to make it a film that would attract newcomers into the club. But the all-important script is still not ready yet. How? Yes, let's make a trailer first!

Her thought process is always so straightforward. It seems she still has not given up hope on burning “The Adventures of Asahina Mikuru Episode 00” onto DVDs and selling them for a huge profit. We could have cut part of the original for this purpose, but she was worried that people could not get enough of it. Or how about those who wanted to watch more will have to join the SOS Brigade? Watching such stuff would only give people a headache, though if this was a PV of Asahina it could probably score 120%…

I glanced at the monitor, which continued playing the video, before returning to my seat. Calling that video a parody is a nicer way to put it, as it simply entails going back to the same places and putting everyone in this time around.

For example, Nagato telling Koizumi, who happened to be carrying a tube looking suspiciously similar to a night light, “I am your mother”, or Nagato being a normal human while her spectacles are on, but becoming one who can fly like a bird, or stroll in the middle of the wilderness dragging a black coffin along once they are removed. Once out of ideas, Haruhi even forced Shamisen and Asahina-san’s character to interchange, forcing her to meow like a cat while she dubbed Shamisen’s voice herself, the result of which is obviously unsynchronized lip movements, or even parts with Shamisen not opening his mouth at all. All of these are seemingly hopeful at first glance, though in actuality they are incapable of being coherently joined, and the result is a series of stories which give the impression of having arranged all the camera scenes randomly, like dominoes. The constantly changing scene and cast and the poorly linked story are all by-products of poor editing. The last straw, however, was the blurry video which seemed as if it was deliberately added in, as well as the senselessly-inserted music that had successfully become indistinguishable from noise pollution.

Tsuruya-san, who did not even have to appear in the first place, can be seen in a kimono standing in front of a Japanese-styled garden laughing loudly, not to forget my sister and Shamisen playing around in the background. In fact, it looks no different from a home-made family video. Actually, these scenes were filmed by Haruhi’s shaky hands during hanami at Tsuruya-san’s place. This film is made up of rubbish scenes forming something briefly resembling a video book that would never even enter the lousiest movie awards. I doubt it could even make it through the first draft, much less be improved in any way. While Asahina-san in waitress costume flying and jumping around should be very successful in marketing the alternative Asahina Mikuru, how many who watched this would actually have believed it was a movie trailer if not for the “The Revenge of Nagato Yuki will open during the cultural festival this fall!” that Haruhi screamed at the end?

Can I add something here? Last time around, didn’t Nagato fly into outer space after being shot? What method did you use to bring her back to Earth?

“That will be thought of later. I will consider new villains too!”

Haruhi the Ultra Director announces.

That is to say that she did not really think about it before and the announcement is just something she thought of impromptu. This is what I call real cheating. If a first-year watched this and was interested, I would advise him or her to think again.

And also those commoners whose eyes lit up upon seeing Haruhi in her cheongsam and Asahina in her maid costume should be warned as well.

In addition, the first-years walking in the courtyard here have graduated from middle school, which means they had completed their mandatory education and have matured in thinking somewhat. When they see Koizumi and I craning our necks while sitting at the booths, they decided to maintain a safe distance from us.

3 Moving from 4th to 5th instar typically only takes a day or less to happen.

Everyone, your judgement is indeed as ingenious as the rats scrambling to leave a drowning ship. The happiness enjoyed by those with a normal and healthy high school life could never be understood by these people in front of my eyes. But I personally had a lot of experience with this particular point and so am very willing to give advice. At this age, growing a year older is like a butterfly moving from the fourth to fifth instar[3] of the larva stage. Even if you wanted to have fun, you should never step near bushes after being warned of landmines buried nearby. As a human, it is important to be able to differentiate between good and bad isn't it?

I muted the source of noise pollution as produced by Haruhi and turned my head to the side.

"……"

Nagato appears as if she is trying to conserve energy and is remaining in standby mode. There is nobody near her table either. It seems that students interested in literature and writing have not debuted yet. I wonder if this will be a headache or joy for Haruhi?

The only activity conducted by the Literature Club last year was the publishing of the club magazine as directed by the puppet student council president under Koizumi. Haruhi, who fell for it immediately, forced us into doing so. Due to a blunder back then, all copies have already been distributed for free except one, which is left on the Nagato's table for perusal. Everyone who contributed to the magazine, including me, was given a free copy as well as a keepsake. However, it seems that people are usually reluctant to share anything that is hard-earned. Although Taniguchi kept complaining about it back then, he refused to give up his copy anyway.

So anyone who hasn't read the magazine before and wishes to do so would have to pick up the sample on Nagato's table.

Just as I continued staring curiously at Nagato seated in a corner with a book in her hands…

"……"

Nagato slowly raised her head. Her eyes, though lifeless, radiated an unseen glow as she turned towards me. As her actions are overly natural, I did not realize that our gazes had actually met and it took me a while before I returned to my senses. At that moment:

"Cat."

Just the act of noticing that this voice, as loud as the ruffling of the gentle wind, actually originated from Nagato's lips took nearly a second. I bore with the intense gaze of hers.

"What happened to the cat?"

"What what happened?"

"What do you mean by what what happened?"

Nagato thought for a while, but her head did not move at all.

"What happened?"

Although the query I posted just now remains unanswered, I already knew what she wanted to ask.

"Are you referring to Shamisen?"

Nagato nodded her head slightly.

"Yes."

"He's still very energetic, and he no longer talks now."

"Really."

After saying this, Nagato lowered her head to continue reading.

So she is worrying about my cat at home. Indeed, Shamisen is the host for that… what is it called? Anyway, these whatever data lifeform whose name I can't remember unless I'm reminded are now inside Shamisen thanks to Nagato. Back to the topic, nothing much actually happened to that cat except that his overeating combined with the lack of exercise caused him to become fatter. Ever since Haruhi had picked him up and thrown him at me, he was still able to enjoy everyday life as a cat without many changes.

I suddenly remembered this seasonal greeting: "Spring is the season where the skies are clear and the cats are fat". Is that really true? I also hoped to be able to laze around like Shamisen during spring break; unfortunately I don't think it is possible anymore.

"What a busy spring break."

Koizumi said that in a depressed tone.

Since his eyes are transfixed on the sky, I thought he was simply talking to himself and so chose to ignore him.

“Don’t you think so?”

Seeing no reply from me, he decided to turn over and ask instead. I don’t know if there are any problems with my eyes, but I believe I see signs of fatigue in those eyes of his.

He started playing with the bangs on his forehead.

“Your eyes are normal, very normal. You are right, I am really feeling fatigued.”

Going crazy with Haruhi all day, normal people are bound to get tired.

“I am not talking about the normal fatigue that you and I know about. Do you still remember my actual identity and mission? Do you still remember why I was posted here in the first place?”

In the beginning it should have been to monitor Haruhi, I guess it’s now changed to licking her boots?

“I apologize, but I am sure you remember that I am an esper. Also, where and when can my powers be activated, and which person’s change in mood will allow me to use my powers. I am sure you still remember all these, correct?”

You have already repeated this numerous times, of course I do. You declared your actual identity to me after Nagato and Asahina-san. This is considered the latest news regarding the members of the SOS Brigade.

“That is good. Then I can get straight to my point.”

Koizumi gave a look of relief, let out a long sigh and lowered his voice.

“I am not getting enough sleep these few days. I tend to wake up in the middle of the night or the early mornings even when I do not want to, every night without exceptions. Thus I cannot quite go back to my normal state of being.”

If you cannot sleep at home at night, then just sleep in class during lessons. It is said that sleeping five minutes during lessons is equivalent to sleeping an hour normally.

“My condition is not exactly insomnia, and the problem does not really lie with me, which I am sure you have realised. We already know each other so well, even if we want to talk in circles, let’s leave it for other, more unique topics instead.”

Koizumi's squinting eyes revealed a seldom-seen seriousness. Haven't you always loved talking in circles? I guess you now have a taste of your own medicine. Although you are less credible than Asahina and Nagato, it is true that we already know each other for quite a while.

"'Sealed Realities' and 'Avatars' you mean."

These should be the areas Koizumi's power will work.

"Correct answer. Recently, the frequency of their appearance is increasing again. It began just after spring break and has continued to today. To be even more precise, it began one day after spring break. Because of that, my working hours are no longer bound by night or day and without any break. Currently we are on twenty-four hour standby already."

Koizumi let out a self-ridiculing sigh.

"I originally thought I had already gotten used to this, after all defeating these Avatars is really part of our job, or should I say part of our duty. But such occurrences have decreased exponentially in the past year. After Suzumiya-san set up the SOS Brigade, her emotions have stabilized a lot. Especially when Suzumiya-san and you returned from that place, the change is even more obvious."

I also seemed to have heard about the decreasing occurrences of such incidents before Christmas last year. It is just before Christmas back then, when Taniguchi showed off to me about him having a girlfriend.

But right after that some people did something rather absurd…

"Hey, wait."

I found some inconsistencies within this theory.

"Koizumi, didn't you see how Haruhi was just now? She was literally dancing around jovially. In fact, I wondered if she was even standing on the ground in the first place. Who knows, maybe she had grown wings or something. And that Sealed Realities and Avatars, shouldn't it only appear when Haruhi was facing great pressure or troubles? She is so busy nowadays that she doesn't even have time to think about any problems, so she could not be bored either. This completely makes no sense."

"Indeed, the Haruhi I saw was full of drive. Looks like she would not be feeling bored. But I have one request, I hope you can recall the events that happened on the last day of spring break."

I am thinking back about it all this time.

"Is there nothing suspicious to you? This shouldn't be so. If it is really so, then there must be things you have not thought of yet. And that happens to be the most important thing."

Koizumi shrugged his shoulders and continued with a tone similar to giving an idiot clues to answering a simple question.

“The last day of spring break. That is the beginning of Suzumiya-san’s change in emotional stability which she isn’t conscious of herself. So, what exactly happened?”

Change that she isn’t conscious of again? Haruhi’s lack of consciousness about changes and Koizumi’s psychiatrist-like analogy of these issues are the roots of most of my headaches.

“Didn’t we go to the flea market that day? Haruhi mentioned that she wanted to participate in the flea market next time. In fact, we deliberately took a train and walked miles to that city just to take a look at it……”

“I am referring to the incident just before taking the train.”

Can you not be so long-winded!?

I closed my eyes and slowly drifted along in my ocean of memories……

Haruhi suddenly wanted to go to the flea market, it was the last few days of the spring break. Oh yeah, it was the time when we were planning to shoot the trailer for the sequel to our first movie.

She made Asahina-san wear her waitress costume and Nagato her magician’s hat and cloak. Then, as if holding a press conference, made both of them stand in a line while she held onto the yellow loudhailer. She then said to Koizumi and I, who had just returned after being chased out of the clubroom.

“Don’t you all agree we’ve got too many things in this room? Just now, I was attempting to find the Ultra Director armband but failed. Maybe it is mixed with something else elsewhere. Perhaps it is time we sort out this mess.”

Wasn’t it your idea to bring all these useless things back for collection like a crow? Nagato would only have books at the most, Asahina-san her tea leaves and tea set and Koizumi his many different board games. Other miscellaneous junk of various sizes occupying space were all brought in by Haruhi.

Haruhi sat on the chair meant for the brigade leader.

“Normally, I would definitely take one when I see anyone giving out fliers about some event coming up. I nearly forgot that I took a particular one recently.”

Saying that, she took out a flier from one of the drawers of the table.

“This is a notice about a flea market coming up. Although it is a bit far, we can get there in about fifteen minutes if we take an express train. If it is possible I really wanted to join, but we’re currently really busy. Also, it takes time for the application to be approved as well.”

The reason we are all so busy now is no thanks to you.

I took the flier Haruhi was using as a fan from her hands and returned to my seat. A flea market huh. In this period of time, I guess this means we take out any of our things to be sold or something.

I looked at this flier that gave Haruhi inspiration for yet another target.

“Tea is coming.”

My personal tea cup suddenly appeared before me.

Asahina-san is always such a gentle and caring person. Even though she is wearing the waitress costume used for filming, she will never forget to pour us tea or stop smiling. Such a gesture almost made me tear up. The waitress costume she is wearing now is just so different from the previous maid costume, what a refreshing change…… after all such a job has always been more suited for her. Normally, waitresses do not usually hold a showdown against aliens.

“Hmm, this costume is really cute, as long as she doesn’t go out……”

Asahina-san seems very mindful of the length of the skirt and continuously kept her legs closed tight, after that, seemingly satisfied, she would happily hug the serving tray and walk back to where the teapot is. Gradually, she finished pouring tea for all members. Although the world is huge, to be able to see Asahina-san in her waitress costume, an image that would make all her supporters salivate, should be reserved for me and the Literature Club clubroom only. And Nagato reading books in the magician’s costume too. I should really take photos of them to preserve these memories.

I thought about all these while sipping my tea with my head bowed down, moistening my dry throat.

“Hey! Kyon!”

After finishing her tea in five seconds, Haruhi suddenly screamed at me loudly and slammed her teacup on the table. What an impatient person.

“It’s not possible this time around, but we will bring something along to participate next time. Quickly sort through the things you have at home and fish out those that will fetch high prices when sold! There will definitely be something. For example, collectibles which you know you will never use but are unwilling to just throw it away, and thus leaving it to collect dust in one corner, presents which you have not even unwrapped after receiving……”

What about those never-before-seen robot models that come with magazines that were bought when I was young? Although there are a lot of them, but because piecing them together is just too much work, so they have been left there for quite a while.

“Those will do.”

Haruhi rudely snatched the flier away from my hand before folding it back up to be kept in the drawer.

“Robot models? I have a feeling that the robot model itself thinks that it will be destroyed in your hands. You might as well sell it to the people who can appreciate it better.”

Compared to the robot models which only kids will buy, why don’t you sell the notebook computers you snatched from the Computer Research Society instead? Those will definitely fetch a good price.

“Those are valuable possessions! Speaking of that, it is time to get them over to upgrade the notebooks already.”

Haruhi next turned her attention to Asahina-san, who was busy blowing at her cup of tea.

“Mikuru-chan should have loads of things as well, right? Like those old clothes and unused cutlery, since you buy things so often.”

“Ah…? Th-That…”

Asahina-san widened her beautiful eyes.

“Y-You are quite right. If I see anything cute I will buy it. But after putting it on, it doesn’t seem that suitable, or may feel very weird… W-Wait, how did you know?”

“Looking at how you are usually is good enough. When walking past departmental stalls with you, your eyes will always light up, sending out electric waves as strong as a child wanting to buy a toy. The ‘I will buy it next time’ look is already plastered all over your face. I wonder how you still have any pocket money left.”

Asahina-san, after hearing this much, shivered all over for a while. But Haruhi had already turned her attention away to the next person by now.

“Yuki surely has a lot of books. There should be enough to open an ‘old books’ stall. The shelves of the clubroom are already filled to the brim, not to forget the floor as well. Look, the floor looks like it’s going to fall through soon.”

“……”

Nagato slowly turned her head to face Haruhi, then to take a glance at the shelves, finally giving me a quick look before continuing to read.

I think Nagato will never let go of her books. Also, her house is not only just filled with books but rather the house has only books and nothing else. Just when I thought of correcting Haruhi…

"Kyon, in that case, you should go to Yuki's house with a cart to help carry her books. You could also help pack them up in a box."

Nagato turned her head to stare at me again. I suddenly had a strange and familiar feeling, reading the message in her eyes. When did I feel this before? …Oh it was around the same time that stupid Nakagawa called me about his ridiculous confession. During the last winter break when we were cleaning out the clubroom, Nagato said nothing about her dozens of books on the clubroom shelves. After all, she doesn't want to lose any of her books in the clubroom or the ones in her home, I think.

"You are right…" Koizumi said with one hand holding onto his teacup. "Although I brought the games here, I could find no opponents at all, so perhaps I should use this chance to reduce the range of my collection."

Can you not face me with that bitter smile of yours?

Haruhi hastily jumped onto the director's chair and sat on it.

"So, everybody, remember to free the last day of the spring break on your schedules! We will visit the flea market, and if we see anything interesting, use the activity funds to buy it!"

Regarding the "activity fund" she is talking about, needless to say, it does not belong to the SOS Brigade but the Literature Club instead.

During the spring break when the school appears to be hinting that "you can have some fun for a while" and closed their doors on us, under the leadership of Haruhi, SOS Brigade members are deprived of even their right to have a fitful rest till noon, being dragged by the nose to visit various places. Even on the last day of the spring break, we are forced to meet at the open space in front of the train station……

"You'd finally reached this point. I am still worrying whether this incident had already been wiped from your memory."

Even if I wipe this incident from my memory, I am pretty sure there would be no advantages to it anyway.

"It is difficult to judge whether it will be an advantage or disadvantage. But if possible, I would very much like to forget about it."

Why say such strange stuff in the first place. Koizumi would not understand a technique like mind control. Also, even if you have such a power, why not operate on Haruhi's brain first instead.

"Just like you said."

Don't put it so seriously. Using your own valuable time to fret over Haruhi's matters is equal to wasting your life away.

"You can't say that either. Suzumiya-san's problems are my problems too."

Koizumi explained in a resigned-to-fate manner and I continued recalling.

On the day of the visit to the flea market, I obediently woke up after hearing the piercing screams of the alarm clock. The feeling of reluctance is best expressed now. Turning back to take a look at the warm bed, only myself waking up seems pretty miserable. Seeing Shamisen happily sleeping away, I have a sudden urge to pull him out of bed, but that seems kind of unmerciful. So I moved on like a soldier going on a journey of no return and walked down the stairs.

Taking a peek at the kitchen, I saw my younger sister biting into freshly-toasted bread before running towards me.

"Ah, good morning, Kyon. Where is Shamisen?"

My younger sister asked while stuffing the toast into her mouth.

I opened the fridge and took out the bottle of malt tea, replying only after pouring a portion of it into my mug and gulping it down in irritation.

"Still sleeping."

"Do you want me to toast you bread as well? Oh, and the egg with the sunny side up is in the kitchen."

"Sorry to trouble you."

After saying that, I walked towards the wash basin. When I returned, my younger sister had already put the bread into the toaster and was putting the plate with the ham into the microwave oven. She wasn't really intent on helping me but simply found operating these machines interesting.

I might as well add something here. My eleven year old younger sister, who will be attending her sixth grade starting tomorrow, plans to go to Miyoko's house to play for the entire day, returning only at nighttime. She had already dressed herself up in her typical outdoor clothes and is now

waiting for her friend to pick her up. But that friend of hers with the same age and same education level as my younger sister simply does not have the same figure.

When I saw Miyokichi on the road three days ago, I was shocked. It had only been a while since I last saw her and yet she looked even more graceful and mature. When my sister and Miyokichi walked together in a line, it looked like the difference between five sisters: Miyokichi as the eldest and my sister the youngest. What exactly did she eat to make her look so different?

Seriously speaking, if Miyokichi was my younger sister, she definitely would not enter my room without permission, much less take things out without asking. She would also wake me up in a more graceful way and would not chase after Shamisen, who already has a phobia of being stroked by my younger sister, around the house and crashing into things. The more I think about it, the more I want to ask – why was I not born being the brother of Miyokichi……

"Topics related to the praising of that girl shall end here."

Koizumi picked up a fallen petal of the cherry blossoms with his hand and said that matter-of-factly.

"The person who has Miyoko as a younger sister would be very lucky, this is a fact that cannot be doubted. But if we look at it from a different angle, there should be people who will think that your younger sister has a lot of potential as well. And is this the time to describe a person in such great detail? Just continue from the time when you left the house to your arrival at the meeting place."

Don't you think you are sounding a little uncaring here? This is because you have never seen Miyoko in person before, that is why you are so cold towards this.

But it is alright, arguing with you over this is useless anyway.

If you really wanted to know the memoirs of the spring break of my first high school year so much, then I will talk about that first. But Koizumi, you were one of those present there too, shouldn't you be well aware of what happened as well?

"I am not interested in my own affairs."

Koizumi continued playing with the cherry blossom petal with his fingers while continuing.

"The person I care about is not there. To put it more directly, while I am a bit mindful of how I am seen through your eyes, but that is only a minute technical detail."

He flicked that cherry blossom petal away.

"Please continue."

I cycled speedily towards the train station as usual.

One of the rules of the SOS Brigade is that the person who is the last to arrive during outings has to pay for lunch. This is effective even till today. Till now, I haven't been treated by anyone else. Although, once in a while, I get an urge to cycle faster with the hopes that I might secure a treat from Haruhi for the first time. However, as if going against me, Haruhi always manages to beat me to it by a small margin. Is she hidden somewhere, monitoring my every action?

I thought about this while checking for any available parking spaces at the bicycle park near the train station. Suddenly, a voice boomed behind my back.

"Yo, Kyon!"

"Wah~~!"

This is just like a guerilla attack. The voice literally rang just behind my back, so it cannot be avoided that my legs, which had been propelling the bicycle forward while maintaining balance while I looked around for a parking space, suddenly leapt off the ground. It almost scared the daylights out of me.

I instinctively turned backwards and, after seeing the face of the owner, immediately shouted in response.

"Sasaki! It's you?!"

"Hey! What is this? Is this how you greet a friend you haven't seen for so long?"

Sasaki held onto handles of the bicycle while standing beside me, giving a gentle smile that carried just a little bit of sarcasm.

"Kyon, I was talking on the phone with Sudou yesterday. Seems he wanted to have a gathering with our classmates from third-year middle school. Although he didn't mention it, according to my gut feelings as well as various reports from multiple sources, he is still unable to forget her. And from my observations, the girl that Sudou likes seemed to be Okamoto who got into a girls' school. Do you still remember her? The girl with the curly hair, a rather cute appearance and a member of the sports society. He asked whether it is okay if we held the gathering this coming summer break, and I agreed. Actually anything is okay for me, how about you?"

If it is held, I would definitely participate. There are a few people with whom I got along with quite well in the past, but we have not met since middle school graduation. As for Okamoto, I am unable to recall who exactly she is at this moment, so I would gladly leave the seat next to her to Sudou.

Sasaki revealed a unique smile that cannot be described and continued talking.

“I knew you would say that. But, Kyon, you mentioned those good friends whom you haven’t met since middle school graduation, I guess that includes me right? In fact, I haven’t seen you ever since we picked up the middle school graduation certificate together. It must have been a year already.”

Sasaki let go of one of the handlebars to the bicycle and ran around it with the free hand, seemingly representing all the time that has past.

“Kyon got into North High right? Has high school life been great so far?”

4 A bolt is 50 yards of fabric.

I cannot decide if it is great or not, at least I am not unhappy about it at this moment. In fact, it may be a bit interesting. If I were to narrate all the amazing events that occurred in this past year, it would be longer than a bolt of cloth[4].

“Isn’t that good? Unlike me, who can hardly find anything to talk about. I can’t say it’s boring, just that nothing big enough in school happened that defied the laws of physics.”

That is good. If incidents like mine happen in every high school nationwide, it would cause panic across the nation before it even becomes interesting.

I analyzed the facial features on the ex-classmate of mine, trying to spot any changes since middle school.

“You entered that suburban private high school didn’t you? I heard that the chances of entering a university from there are high…”

Sasaki once again changed to another smile.

“Seems you haven’t totally forgotten about me yet, what a relief. Thanks to that, a day of lessons in that school is enough to tire you to death. Look, I even have to study today.”

Sasaki pointed in the direction of the train station.

“I will be taking the train to cram school later. Sometimes I really feel that I study just for the sake of studying. I can’t even feel the spring break. And starting tomorrow, I still have to take the train to an even further place to study. There isn’t anything else that turns anyone off more than adapting to a crowded morning train.”

This can be compared to that miserable slope I have to climb up to reach North High daily.

“Isn’t that good? It’s good for your health. I should have chosen an urban school back then. I really envy Sudou.”

I don't know what exactly is so funny, but suddenly Sasaki let out a hearty laugh that is not easily imitated.

"Oh yeah Kyon, what did you come to this train station for? If we are travelling in the same direction, we can continue our conversation. I still have plenty to talk about."

I checked the time on my watch. Drats, I am only three minutes away from the agreed meeting time.

"Sorry, Sasaki, I have already agreed to meet my friends. One of them is especially conscious of time and God knows what dire consequences there would be if I were to be late."

"Friends? From high school? Oh, I see. Then I have to park the bicycle quickly. Ah, don't worry, I will be parking my bicycle here daily. I have a season ticket with the operator. As for the location…"

Sasaki found an empty spot at the bicycle park and parked the bicycle there before turning back to me.

"…It's here. Kyon, I wish to follow you to the meeting place. Your friends are my friends after all, I really want to see what they look like."

There will be no benefits to meeting them, but since Sasaki wanted to take a look, I don't really mind either. Although introducing them to Sasaki would not cause any harm to her life, I feel very proud of myself when I am able to introduce the cute and gentle Asahina-san to others.

After I found an empty parking spot and rushed to make the payment, Sasaki had already come over with the bag slung over one shoulder. We discussed fragments of our middle school life while on our way to the meeting place. When we were about to reach that place…

"Kyon, you still haven't changed a bit."

Sasaki said in a low voice.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, I am relieved now."

Why should you be relieved? Now that I look at it, you haven't changed either, have you?

"If that were really so, it would have meant that neither of us had grown at all. If the result of my height and weight measurements were anything to go by, the amount of flesh on my body should have changed."

Then I must have grown taller by a bit.

“I apologize, I don’t mean that. A person’s appearance can be changed as and when he or she wants. For example, just leaving the hair to grow longer or cutting it short is enough to make a difference in the image you present to others. The aspect that is harder to change is the character. No matter if it improves or takes a turn for the worse, if humans are interested in material comforts, unless we make massive changes to the concept of material comfort, thought patterns and viewpoints are not easy to change.”

Listening to this gave me a sense of familiarity. Oh yes, I remember now. Back in middle school, talking to Sasaki had always been quite a challenge to one’s comprehension skills.

“Also…”

Sasaki continued talking while walking.

5 Famous for first theorising that the earth orbited around the sun - at the time a very radical way of seeing the universe. Also introduced coin reform, including the modern copper coin now often seen.

“…There is the possibility of thoughts suddenly making a 180-degree turn, much like changes introduced by Nicolas Copernicus[5]. Changes in the world are changes in ideologies. This probably represents everything, because it is impossible for humans to correctly understand creatures who have an intelligence exceeding that of themselves. Our eyes cannot see infrared rays, but snakes actually have eyes that work like heat-sensitive goggles, and rays like these are in plain view for them. When sound waves go beyond a certain level, our ears will be unable to pick them up, yet dogs and various other animals are able to hear ultrasound waves. Infrared rays and ultrasound waves produced by Galton’s whistle[6] cannot be seen or heard by humans, but it does not mean they do not exist, just that we cannot feel their existence.”

6 A whistle used mostly during the training of dogs and cats since its sound waves cannot be caught by the human ears but not so for these animals.

Sasaki, perhaps you really should have come to North High. We have a guy here who sounds exactly like you. You would definitely get along very well with him. Fortunately, he will be at the meeting place as well. Do you want to use this opportunity to get to know him?

Just when I was talking about such a meeting, images of every member of the SOS Brigade, with the exception of myself, of course, appeared before me.

7 Delphi, about a two hours car ride away from Athens, is the most sacred city of ancient Athens as well as the “centre of the world” in ancient times, with the most famous attraction being the ruins of the Temple of Apollo. According to ancient Greek mythologies, as Zeus wanted to confirm the position of the “centre of the world”, released two eagles flying in opposite directions and made the point where they met the “centre of the world” before making his most beloved son, the God of Sun, Apollo, in charge of this area, and bestowed upon him a precious stone that made Delphi the origin of the Oracle.

“You sure brought an impressive friend along.”

Koizumi replied in a slightly offended manner.

“From a particular perspective, we are indeed able to communicate with each other well. But in actual fact, I cannot even be compared to her. Our views are too different. People whom I admire are actually not too many. You are one of them.”

Even if you try to curry my favor like this, unlike the Priestess of Delphi, I would not tell you the Oracle[7].

“This I understand. There is nothing scarier than force majeure[8]. Those forces that can be seen by the eyes and heard by the ears yet remain uncontrollable really make people paranoid.”

You are right, this is what I am referring to. Sasaki is powerful in this way. After all, it’s someone that I had spent the third year of my middle school life with, so of course I would understand that. But the fact that even Koizumi understood this as well made me really surprised.

8 Usually found in legal contracts, it usually refers to events that one knows exists or occurs but yet not within his or her control, such as acts of nature.

“This is nothing to be surprised about. The ‘Organization’ had conducted investigations into your life various times. Thus, it is obvious that everything about you since you were born was already analyzed before reaching the conclusion that you are a normal person.”

Thanks a lot then. I didn’t realize that your ‘Organization’ is able to bestow upon me a Certificate of Guarantee.

“If you feel there is a need to, I can always give you one. Just joking. But when I knew that you knew Sasaki in third year of your middle school and even became close friends, my mood is no longer that of just joking around.”

Why?

Koizumi continued as if he was reciting poetry.

“Because your friend Sasaki, despite looking like a normal person, if observed in another way, could be extraordinary as well. Moving like a particle, each action Sasaki triggers causes disturbances, much like light.”

9 Koizumi is trying to say that Sasaki’s behaviour resembles the photoelectric effect, basically that every action she takes trigger disturbances, much like light.
I don’t care about whatever force majeure. I am already used to having random vocabulary words being thrown at me once in a while. As for the photoelectric behavior of light[9], I hope I would never come across it in my entire life.

Anyway, Sasaki and I had already reached the front of the train station. Where we were standing now was the usual meeting place of the SOS Brigade.

I had gotten used to seeing the scenery as well as the people. Explanation: three of them in plain clothes, one in uniform.

Then, the very appreciative words which the leader must always mention…

"How dare you arrive late! I have already mentioned it countless times, not only are you the last to arrive, you even arrived later than the agreed meeting time! Don't become so lazy just because spring has arrived! Kyon, can't you just appreciate each and every passing second? Your time does not only belong to you, each of us here who has been waiting for you here have a share of it too! So, you should be fined! Although the time that has past can never be gotten back again, you should at least try to make us a little happier."

After Haruhi finished the entire paragraph in one breath, she took in a deep breath and looked at the person beside me with a surprised look.

"Who is this."

"Ah, this person here is……"

Just when I was about to complete the sentence……

"……a really close friend."

Sasaki added quickly.

"Eh?"

Looking at Haruhi whose eyes were opened wide, Sasaki continued explaining after shaking the head slightly.

"Although we were close friends, that only applies to middle school, and even then, only for the third year as well. Maybe it is because of this that Kyon failed to remain in contact with me for the past year. Of course the same applies to me. But, being able to chat without inhibitions despite meeting only after one precarious year, proves that he is my close friend. That is how it is to me. What about you Kyon?"

I would not deny that we were once very close friends. Back in the middle school days, I often mixed around with Sasaki. After class I hung out with Sasaki more in comparison to my other middle school classmates, but…

Why am I feeling uneasy? I must first say that I did not remember doing anything that is against my conscience. In fact, I don't think I did any. So why does Haruhi have such a strange

expression on her face after knowing Sasaki and I were close friends? My feeling is like that of not bringing an umbrella out despite knowing that a storm will be arriving in five minutes.

Now that I think about it, I can vaguely feel that the frequency of Asahina-san blinking her eyes had increased back then. Also, Koizumi had entered a state of deep thought with his hands rubbing his chin. In her uniform, Nagato's expression did not change, but I had already focused my attention on Haruhi, so I can't be sure either.

At this moment, I noticed Sasaki stepping out half a step, lips curled into the shape of a crescent, revealing a smile and stretching out a hand, seemingly wanting to shake Haruhi's hand.

"I am Sasaki. You must be Suzumiya-san, I have heard a lot about you."

Haruhi's eyes took a quick glance at me. I quickly corrected her like a person wrongly accused being forced to take the rap and become a criminal.

"I didn't mention anything about your devilish deeds! Sasaki, how do you know of Haruhi anyway?"

"We live in the same area, and I tend to hear of controversial rumors once in a while. You are not the only one who went to North High from our school either, Kyon."

Are you referring to people like Kunikida?

"So he went to North High too? Hmm… is he okay? It must be relaxing for him. With his potential, he could be in a much better school, and yet he went to North High, what a strange person."

Sasaki ended the conversation on ex-classmates, facing Haruhi yet again.

"I heard that Kyon has been under a lot of your care in North High. I hope you can continue to take care of him well."

Sasaki did not withdraw the extended hand and revealed a kind smile.

In response to the American-gestured greeting from Sasaki, Haruhi gave an expression of a child accidentally mistaking a pebble for chocolate and putting it in his or her mouth, but still shook Sasaki's hand eventually.

"Sure."

Haruhi held onto Sasaki's hand and stared its owner right in the eye.

"Seems like I do not have to introduce myself then."

"True."

Sasaki stared back at Haruhi with a face full of smiles, and laughed with a voice like that of the croak of a baby Japanese tree frog before continuing.

“These few are……”

Sasaki let go of Haruhi’s hand with a sense of reluctance and swept through the people present.

Perhaps remembering that introducing the members is the role of the leader as well, Haruhi quickly countered.

“The cutiepie on that side is Mikuru-chan, the one in her sailor uniform is Yuki and the one on this side is Koizumi.”

The people she pointed out responded:

“Ah…ah… I-I am Asahina Mikuru.”

Looking at the only senior in her spring outfit that would definitely sell very well if a “Mikuru Series” is ever launched, with both her hands holding onto a handbag, hurriedly turned over and bowed.

“I am Koizumi.”

Our assistant brigade leader bowed politely at a near forty-five degree angle, as if he had special lessons from the ‘butler’ Arakawa.

“……”

Wearing the uniform and behaving exactly like she would be in school, Nagato remained motionless.

After hearing the various responses from each of them, Sasaki must have thought it would be too troublesome, and so did not request for handshakes with the other few like Haruhi.

“Hi all.”

After saying that, Sasaki evaluated each of the people standing in front with interest.

And the three SOS Brigade members evaluated this guest with their own methods. Asahina looking at Sasaki gingerly, Koizumi with his usual trademark smile and Nagato staring motionlessly with her eyes that looked like they were taken out of the deep oceans, submerged in seawater.

Sasaki looked like someone that’s trying to commit the names and looks of the three brigade members into their memory and stoned for a while, before turning back to me……

“So, Kyon, it’s about time for me to embark on the train so I’ll get going. Keep in contact yeah? Bye~”

Sasaki waved goodbye at us and proceeded to smile at Haruhi before walking towards the fare gate.

I gave a sigh of relief and looked at the disappearing back of Sasaki until it disappeared.

We can’t even talk properly despite not meeting for a full year. Perhaps another year would have past before we meet again.

After remaining silent for a few moments, Haruhi said.

“What a strange person.”

If even you thought it was strange, it is definitely not just “a bit”.

After saying that, she turned her gaze away from the fare gates and back at us.

“Is that…… friend of yours always like this?”

“Yeah. No change at all, be it physically or mentally.”

“Hmm……?”

Haruhi tilted her head, as if she wanted to empty out any unwanted thoughts she had remembered out from the ears, but very quickly forgot about adjusting her head angle but jumped and changed the direction her body was facing instead.

“Forget it. Kyon, we’d better go to the restaurant now, your treat. I’m sure you’ve brought extra money along, right? We can buy anything we find interesting at the flea market.”

Haruhi revealed a smile that was like the fluorescent light on display at the electrical departmental store and walked out of the station in big steps.

My, my. If you simply asked me to carry things, I would be fine with it. But can’t you buy anything you liked with your own money instead? I had better keep a close eye on Nagato’s Literature Club activity funds in case Haruhi misuses it.

“As for what happened later……”

I told Koizumi.

“You should know by now. We went to the restaurant, I treated everyone to the meal, went to the flea market, Haruhi bought a whole load of things, and we had lunch at a high class restaurant with a sea view before going home. I also went to Miyoko’s house on my way back.”

Don’t tell me you had already forgotten that because you kept holding onto the chess set you bought from the old couple, all of the carrying duties were left to me. Thanks to you, I was forced to carry a whole load of junk, like the unpolished desert granite, while running around the area. The only things that offered me some consolation were the shrieks like “Waa~ What a simple toy… but it is really beautiful…” from Asahina-san, who was holding onto a kaleidoscope that looks like it was made by a grade school child, and Nagato, who seemed to be staring intently at some mask that looked like it belonged to an evil wizard from some ancient tribe.

“So far, is there anything that doesn’t seem right compared to your memory?”

“Luckily, I don’t think so.”

Koizumi said while surveying the monitor in earnest.

“An objective truth is like what you have pointed out, there is nothing wrong. But, if we look at it subjectively, your opinion and mine seem to have some major differences.”

He turned his gaze towards me while saying that. It is such a gaze that I most cannot stand about him.

“So, this is where the problem is. I said just now that the frequency of the appearance of ‘Sealed Realities’ had increased recently, or to put it more correctly, is comparable to when Suzumiya-san had just entered high school. Starting last year, and continuing until this year, the number of times I have had to work has decreased, but has recently spiked up to previous levels starting this spring. What is the reason for this?”

I am getting increasingly impatient…..

“What exactly do you want to say?”

“Although I did not want to spell it out exactly, but there are times when some things, if not expressed in words, will never reach the hearts of others. Cases when speechless communication being able to transmit information accurately are few and far between, I shall illustrate the following as cause and effect. According to the current situation, the part on cause is the sentence ‘the last day of spring break’. Effects are ‘Sealed Realities’ and ‘Avatars’. So, what exactly does this mean? This is my question to you.”

“……”

I am engulfed by the speechlessness like that of Nagato. Areas near my hindbrain started to hurt.

10 A period of time when many fine art pieces are created.

Koizumi revealed a smile found on a mask dug out from the Jomon Period[10]. If nobody said this is a smile, I really would not understand.

“Because Suzumiya-san started creating ‘Sealed Realities’ in the new school term, I can infer that there must have been a problem on the last day of spring break. And when we wonder what exactly could have happened, our normal SOS Brigade activities would not be of much importance. It is only that we spent one jovial day at the flea market. So if we are to talk about problems, it had to be the intervention of variable factors……. Regarding the variable factor, I think you should know that.”

You mean Sasaki.

“But why? Sasaki is just a middle school friend whom I met by coincidence at our usual meeting place. How did it turn into the source of Haruhi’s problems?”

Koizumi opened his mouth with a look of shock before looking at me with a sense of connoisseurship than friendliness, just like when Shamisen first saw the cicada my younger sister caught and brought home, and continued this way for nearly ten seconds.

Just when I wanted to wave my hand in front of his eyes to check if he was still conscious, this esper with a harmless-looking and handsome face shook his head quite strongly.

“If you want me to say why……”

He turned towards me in exaggerated actions.

“That would be the self-proclaimed very close friend Sasaki of yours, who exudes a charm that is able to mesmerize eight out of ten guys.”

Koizumi used a voice with the determination of an evil imperial official wanting to assassinate the king.

I have to reverse time back to two years ago from this time.

During the spring after entering third-year middle school, I was forced to attend a cram school by my paranoid mother, who was afraid that I would be unable to make it to a high school.

Coincidentally, Sasaki was in the same cram school class that I was, and also happened to be the only person in that class who was also from my middle school class. And also, very coincidentally, we happened to be sitting near each other. After that, though I am not really sure who began first, we started chatting. Although I do not exactly remember it very well now, but I think it began with something like “Yo, you are having lessons here as well huh?”

That is the turning point, and after that, in the middle school classroom, we made occasional small talk with each other.

11 In the Japanese language, there are gender differences to words. For example, simply for the word “I”, the males can pronounce it as “boku” and “ore”, girls as “atashi” while “watashi” can be used by both genders for extremely polite situations. Normally, girls would stick to the female versions and vice versa of the pronunciation regardless of whether they are talking to males or females, unlike Sasaki.

Although I didn’t really pay special attention to it, I quickly noticed that the language used by Sasaki when she was with boys was different from that when she was with girls[11].

I guess there must be some justification behind her doing that. Could it be that she hoped that the other party would not treat her as a girl or love interest? I think I am thinking too much.

Seems I am fine with it either way, I have never interfered with her decision on this matter. I do not have enough confidence in my language skills to the extent that I am able to correct others anyway.

As for my name, Sasaki seemed to find it very interesting.

“Kyon huh…… what a special nickname. Why were you given such a nickname?”

I explained the stupid reason behind it as well as my younger sister’s antics with angst.

“Oh…… so what is your real name?”

After telling her verbally, Sasaki turned her neck and pupils in different directions.

“So this is how Kyon’s name came about. So how do you write it out? Ah. Don’t tell me first. Let me try and guess it.”

The enthusiastic Sasaki thought for a while, before laughing out loud.

“Is this how it is written?”

She hurriedly picked up her mechanical pencil and started writing on the notebook. I let out a gasp of surprise after she wrote the name down. Sasaki wrote my name perfectly.

“Can you tell me the reason for having such a royal and imposing name?”

And so I told her the reason, which my father told me when I asked him when I was still young, verbatim.

“Great.”

After Sasaki said that, it kind of influenced me to think the same way as well.

“But, I still like the name Kyon more. It sounds nice when pronounced verbally. Can I call you that? Or do you want me to give you another nickname? After all you don’t seem to really like this nickname of yours…”

How did you know that I don’t like it?

“Because I got a quicker response when I called you by your real name than when I called you by your nickname. The difference was about 0.2 seconds.”

That is because only those people who have proper business with me will address me by my real name. Like during lesson time when teachers ask a question or from those people whom I do not know as well…… especially when it is girls or something like that…… and you just said 0.2 seconds? You can tell that kind of difference?

“Because this is normally the amount of time it takes for the signals to reach the brain and effect the action. You can respond immediately when people called you by your real name, but the response is slower when people call you Kyon due to your subconciousness. I think that is because you don’t really like this nickname deep inside your heart.”

Now that I think about it, this is the first time I heard of so much jargon at once.

The cram school lessons happened three days every week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. They were always at night.

Other than the Saturdays when there was no school, every Tuesday and Thursday, I would go to the cram school together with Sasaki. The cram school was near the biggest train station in this area. If we were to walk there from my middle school, we would probably never reach there. And public buses would go in a loop just to arrive at the cram school. So the simplest and ideal way would be to cycle from the school to the train station. By this method, we can arrive at the cram school within fifteen minutes.

Since my house was just along the straight-line distance from my middle school to the cram school, I would bring out my bicycle from my house and cycle to the cram school. Having Sasaki ride on pillion out of convenience also became a habit of mine. To Sasaki, it helped her save a bundle on transportation.

Although we were in the same class in the cram school as well, there wasn’t exactly a lot of free time for us to chat all day long. Both of us would fit into the atmosphere and work hard with everyone else. Because of this, the steadily decreasing curve on my report card in middle school second year stopped moving downwards, allowing me to relax a little. After seeing the scores moving up with each passing test, my mother, who forced me into the cram school against all odds, felt gratified.

If my mother could have changed her pet phrase that “If you do not study well, you will not be able to make it into the same university as Sasaki-san.”, it would have been even better. I just do not understand why must I get into the same university as her.

After the cram school was over, the skies would have already turned dark. I would often raise my head up and admire the bean-sized natural satellites in the sky while pushing my bicycle along, with Sasaki following closely behind. I would accompany Sasaki, who takes a public bus home, to the nearest bus stop.

“So Kyon, see you tomorrow in school.”

Sasaki would board the public bus and would wave to me while saying the above. Then I would be on my way home……

Okay, that’s all for the reminiscing.

“I cannot believe you two had already progressed to that stage.”

Koizumi placed his finger on his eyebrow.

“This is just like a scene from a pure and innocent middle school love story, isn’t it?”

You can say that. Wait, no. Sasaki and I did not even get involved officially as boy-girlfriends. Even suggesting that is already incorrect.

“Yeah, I thought so too. If you think that this is so, of course it would be correct. But how would the people around you see it? If they saw you like this, what would they think about?”

Don’t know why I have this bad premonition. Back then, Kunikida and Nakagawa had misunderstood Sasaki and my relationship too……

“See, didn’t I misunderstand too? Of course I am not the only one who will think this way. Maybe Asahina-san and Nagato are having the same thoughts as me too. But since those two more or less know a bit about you, I need not worry too much on that front. they would quit worrying after a while and not take it to heart. But I know there is one person who would really mind.”

“……Who?”

Koizumi’s smile had a tinge of evilness. The look in his eyes seemed to be blaming me for something.

“I have reached this point and you still cannot understand. Do you want me to cut your head open and write the name there directly into your brain?”

I already understand after you had put it this way.

“Although I still find it unbelievable……”

My head feels like there are many caterpillars crawling on its surface. (TL: As in the tingly feeling.)

“You are saying after Haruhi is feeling uncomfortable after seeing Sasaki, and hearing her call me a very close friend? But must she throw a tantrum? Is it her subconscious at work again?”

“Sealed Realities and Avatars, they are phenomena which you should know about, but the current situation is different when compared to the past. While the Sealed Realities have not undergone any significant change, the movement of the Avatars is strangely quiet. They used to cause major destruction. But now, they stand around doing nothing. In fact, only once in a while are they reminded of their own duty and knock lightly on a few buildings around them.”

The greenish-white monster is starting to gain sense, isn’t it a good thing?

“To the ‘Organization’, it is the same. Because if we do not destroy these Avatars, the Sealed Reality would not disappear.”

Koizumi continued his explanation…

“From a conclusive point of view, the Avatars are currently in a state of daze, or Suzumiya-san is. It is as if she does not know what she is thinking, or even make sense of what she is thinking about. And so she could only drift along this dreary state of hers, thinking about her problems subconsciously.”

I think Mr. Sigmund Freud should be laughing in the other world. I am sure he did not expect the results of his research to be used so commonly to analyze Haruhi.

“From my viewpoint, if we attribute everything to Suzumiya-san’s jealousy of Sasaki-san, everything will be much easier to understand.”

I am afraid I have to rebut this statement. I did not say the following for anyone else, but for the good of Haruhi……

“She was the one who mentioned that love relationships are a kind of mental illness!”

“Then I shall ask you, do you think Suzumiya-san’s psychological skills would be able to see through all the different kinds of love between males and females?”

Definitely not.

“I thought so too. Suzumiya-san thinks she understands it very well even though she doesn’t. Her maturity does not vary much compared to girls of the same age as her. From here, you can see

that she is actually a very normal teenage girl, except that she just isn't frank enough with herself."

I don't think you are qualified enough to say that. From my perspective, you are someone who isn't very frank as well.

"Really?"

Koizumi stopped his smile that resembled that of an ancient mask, while he stroked his cheeks as if acting.

"It seems my skills are still not enough, you actually saw through it so easily."

He spread out his two hands and shook his head.

"If we are to analyze this, then we can say that after Suzumiya-san found out that you have a friend that she doesn't know of from the past, and had an emotion that could not be described. Although she might have considered that such an incident may take place, she hadn't really seen it happening till now. Such an emotion cannot be described as just jealousy, but an emotion that is more primitive and natural. I will put it another way if you still cannot comprehend. You ought to have at least a few old friends. This, Suzumiya-san can understand. Even if there are any female friends, there is nothing to be surprised about. But having Sasaki-san proclaim herself that you are a very close friend of hers is something that is unexpected. Even though I already knew of her existence, it still comes as quite a surprise to me as well."

"I understa……. no, I totally do not understand."

"Because Suzumiya-san had always been in a state of loneliness throughout middle school, the phrase 'close friend' may have been quite a shock to her."

"Didn't she want it that way herself? Where she would be 'aloof from worldly affairs'?"

"There should still be a bit of shock. For example, if I have a friend of the opposite gender whom you do not know of suddenly appearing in front of you, how would you feel?"

"Do you really have one?"

I lifted my body outwards while asking that. Even if this guy has a girlfriend behind my back, it wouldn't be surprising at all.

Koizumi gave a bitter smile.

"This example is not very good. I should not use myself as an example. So if Asahina-san had a very close male friend in the past, and they are still rather close even till now?"

Perhaps I would not feel too good. But……

“This can’t be quite possible. Asahina-san and Nagato are not here to play or sightsee.”

I think that it would be better if they were able to unwind a bit more and have fun instead. And Asahina-san’s past is actually the future that is very far from us isn’t it?

“This is only an assumption. What if it is true, what would you think? There should be a strange feeling that could not be described isn’t there? It isn’t jealousy, nor is it confusion. First, Asahina-san did not pay any special attention to the guy, and on the surface, it is as if there are no special feelings between them. Even you yourself cannot figure out what is happening. Thus, questioning yourself about that aimlessly would be pretty stupid. And so attempting to forget such an incident is the best way to go about it. And now, you can try applying the example of Asahina-san and yourself to you and Suzumiya-san.”

Cheers from a small group could be heard from the opposite of the quadrangle. It seems a first-year has decided to join a particular society.

Koizumi turned his head in that direction.

“However, one’s subconscious mind isn’t so easily fooled. That is why as the subconscious mind tries to vent its feelings, Sealed Realities and incomplete Avatars are formed. Although the reason for this seems very clear, in actual fact it is not. And that is why there is no good strategy to counter it. Actually it is not really true that there are none……”

Koizumi squinted harder with each passing second.

“Kyon! Koizumi!”

Haruhi, along with Asahina-san, was walking towards us with steps that seemed as if she was trying to break the ground of the quadrangle, her hands placed over Asahina-san’s shoulders.

“Kyaa~! Ow, ow ow…..”

Because the difference in distance covered in each step was probably about five times more for one than the other, Asahina-san’s legs simply could not handle it at all. Haruhi simply ignored this point and dragged her along as if she were prey she just caught and walked towards us.

I originally thought she would at least bring a first-year along, but she actually returned empty-handed. Even cheongsams and maid costumes are not enough to catch a single fish? Seems the first-years of this year have common sense.

Haruhi stood in front of the LCD monitor screening the trailer, still refusing to let go of Asahina-san.

“Is there anybody interested in joining coming by? What about Yuki? Is there anyone?”

I think that Nagato’s head seems to be shaking slightly side to side.

“We went to many places, but they all don’t make the grade. No way. There are some who, after hearing that they would be able to drink Mikuru-chan’s self-brewed tea if they joined the brigade, had their saliva dripping all over the ground. Those who nodded their heads to that would have failed the first part of my admission test. As for the girls, as soon as we got near them, they started running away. Seems there isn’t much luck this year.”

I am afraid that we are giving others the false impression that we are a Cosplay Research Society……

“But I still think that there would at least be one person who can pass the test. Everything had only just begun! Just begun! Kyon, are there any interesting juniors from your middle school? I definitely don’t think there will be any from mine, so all those who came from East Junior High should be ignored. I forgot to inform you all about this until just now.”

While Haruhi is talking loudly just now, her face……

Showed a beautiful smile that radiated the glow of a nuclear fusion of multiple stars. I don’t think there are any words other than glitzy that can describe it better.

A very intriguing smile.

On that day, we failed to achieve anything in the end, and so we could only return to the clubroom in a dark mood.

Asahina-san heaved a huge sigh of relief that seemed to have emerged from the bottom of her heart, before carrying the teapot to the stove and started heating them. On the other hand, both Koizumi and I buried our heads in the messy wires coiling all over the table.

Nagato rolled the stickers that are labeled Literature Club into a ball and threw them into the rubbish bin, much like how one does with a tissue one just cleared his or her nose with, delicately placed the club magazine sample back onto the bookshelf, as if holding onto a gem, before mechanically moving back to a corner of the clubroom and opening up a hardcover book. Although she sat pretty far away from us just now, I don’t think she wouldn’t have overheard my conversation with Koizumi. But the emotionless face and lips in power-saving mode of the alien humanoid interface that haven’t changed in the past year brought me unlimited serenity and calmness.

Haruhi sat on the seat reserved for the brigade chief and shook the pyramid-shaped sign with her fingers at the top part of the figure.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone remotely interesting among the first-years. Looks like we have to widen the search area after all. Maybe the ones with potential had entered the sports clubs. People will never appear by themselves if we keep waiting. It is always better when the sea is larger and we cast the net more often.”

Haruhi crossed her slim legs that are emerging from the cheongsam, revealing an expression of a person popular with children thinking of the next game to play with them. No matter how you look at it, it shows excitement.

As for my own opinion, instead of mindlessly casting nets, why not find a specific place and fish there with a fishing rod instead? It might be easier to catch large and quality fish this way. But I have no plans to share my thoughts with her and thus automatically participate in her plan to tempt and abduct members.

“I am not thinking about letting go of big fishes either. In fact, I am thinking of surveying clubrooms one by one and getting hold of them before they decide to join the other clubs.. We have so many students here, there must be at least one that fits our appetite.”

Fits your appetite? So what flavor of first-year would you like? It would be best if they could be eaten right after being roasted?

“For example, those that are cuter than Mikuru-chan, more obedient than Yuki, more courteous than Koizumi, all these kinds would do.”

You sure is setting a high standard. Plus, the only realistic option that Haruhi gave of the three would be for Asahina-san only. Let’s not say that the actual reason for having Nagato is “Wearing spectacles is so unique” kind of crap. It is only because the clubroom Haruhi wanted to occupy belonged to Nagato’s Literature Club that Nagato was accepted as a member. As for Koizumi, it is only because he was a “mysterious transfer student” in Haruhi’s terms that allowed him to enter. Will she get the next person who transfers over in May as well?

“The spot for mysterious transfer student is already filled by Koizumi and so it is enough. And he has been quite an excellent assistant brigade leader. There is no longer a need for a similar role anymore. It must be someone interesting. The SOS Brigade only recruits the very best after all.”

After turning on the computer, Haruhi supported her head with one hand and clicked the mouse with the other.

“I am so careless.”

You being extremely careless didn’t exactly start now.

“I should have surveyed the middle schools in this region and taken note of all those with potential. Otherwise, if those who could have been our club members entered other high schools, it would be too much of a waste. Why don’t we set up branches of the SOS Brigade in other schools as well? Or should we set up a preparatory SOS Brigade in nearby middle schools instead?”

Haruhi’s fantasies seems to be reaching intoxicating levels. I inevitably let out a sigh.

“What are we recruiting so many members for? Are you planning to set up an American football team?”

“My SOS Brigade must go global as fast as possible. Isn’t hard drive space increasing all the time as well? My target is the entire world. If we do not globalize, how can we survive in this globalizing world?”

So globalization comes after the information age? I still like my current humble life more. My current status is a high school student without any proper credentials anyway. I am not so oblivious to my own limits as to globalize a simple brigade like this.

Why don’t you find a place and set up a private school next time and become its principal and name it the SOS School instead? You can then force everyone to become SOS Brigade members at that time. Hmm…… now that I think about it, such a thought is rather scary.

“Haha, that is so stupid, I don’t want to set up a business.” Haruhi exclaimed with laughter. “We are not profit-driven!”

This could be considered an improvement. Although she spewed a whole lot of unrealistic things, but if it was the Haruhi of last year, she would have insisted on attending the clubs and societies briefing and printed large volumes of SOS Brigade fliers and distributing a piece to any random person. I don’t know if it is because of that strict student council president with his shining eyes, but Haruhi has gone underground instead.

It seems that while she still plans to have multiple SOS Brigade branches, she isn’t yet willing to accept anyone that comes by the brigade headquarters. I guess she hopes that every member who joined the brigade would bring her a strange surprise. For example, victims of alien abductions, time travelers waking up and finding themselves in the past, espers fighting bad guys in alternate dimensions, people like that. These would be the types she definitely wanted to hear from.

Those things used to be what I wanted to hear too.

But, at this moment, I no longer find them a necessity.

I am playing chess with Koizumi, sipping on the tea prepared by Asahina-san to moisten my throat, using the corner of my eye to monitor Nagato, who is sitting in a corner in the correct sitting posture, reading a book, all the while thinking about…

The official members of SOS Brigade shouldn’t be increasing anymore, right?

Even though we have people like Tsuruya as our Honorary Advisor, Sakanaka a non-member supporter, or when we take over clubs like what we did with the Computer Research Society, it is very unlikely that there would be new members who can join us five, who already have our roots deeply embedded in the brigade, and stay for long. That is what I predict would happen.

12 A Swiss psychiatrist who was on very good terms with Sigmund Freud till they experienced a theoretical divergence, when they stopped working together.

This is just my prediction after all, and there isn't any reason that justifies this. I only subconsciously felt so, and the reason for this would best be explained by Carl Gustav Jung[12].

In the end, my prediction was half-correct and half-wrong. But, I must add a classic sentence here…… the current me is obviously unable to predict what would happen in the future.

I guess no one would have expected such a troublesome thing to happen, no matter if the person was Koizumi, Nagato, or perhaps even Asahina-san (big) as well.

As for the source of all these troubles, it can be no one else other than Suzumiya Haruhi.

Chapter 1

It happened the next day, a Friday.

That habit of Haruhi's from the first year, leaving class for most of the break time, is still conducted daily even though it's a new year. So it was no surprise that when the bell rang, signifying the end of fourth period, our brigade leader immediately vanished. I, also in my second year, still ate lunch with Taniguchi and Kunikida at the same table.

I don't care about Taniguchi, but once I see Kunikida's harmless face, I can't help but think of Sasaki, whom I'd met several days earlier. I tried not to make it obvious so that he wouldn't notice, but he saw me looking at him.

"What's the matter? Do you really like omelettes so much?"

Kunikida acted exactly like Sasaki said he would and replied 'lightly'.

"No, nothing."

I immediately replied.

"I'm just surprised we still managed to get put in the same class."

"That's true."

Stopping those hands of his that had been continuously separating and scattering the okazu (side dishes), Kunikida lifted his head.

"I'm very happy. When I first saw the class listings, I almost couldn't believe my eyes."

I had certainly been sure that you were going to be in the sciences class.

"That's what I was going to do at first. But I'm not very good at humanities, so I want to use this year to get better at them. I'll prioritize the sciences when we get to our third year. Also, in the second year, they start to categorize both the Humanities and the Sciences. That means there are a lot more choices for classes, and running around to get to them all becomes very tiring, especially by the second semester." (!)

As for Taniguchi… Meh, I don't really care what happened here.

"Hey, that's cruel, Kyon," Taniguchi protested. "I originally wanted to get into a class with prettier girls. My goal was something along the lines of Class six……"

With that, his gaze started to slide towards the girls in our class.

"Look, absolutely nothing has changed. And I'm still with you guys……"

He's still such a vulgar rascal, that much hasn't changed. I guess that's good. We'll do the same thing as last year, and 'Help please!' on the tests. (!)

"This I can promise you: I will not let that piece of paper change my life(!). Leave it to me."

The way you pound your chest and assert that does make me feel a bit better, but I wonder if you could live up to such exaggerated claims. I would have no complaints if Taniguchi had some latent abilities or special talents to back that statement up. If that was the case, I might have a chance at convincing my mother that grades are just meaningless numbers.

"But, I never expected to be in the exact same class as Suzumiya five years in a row. Isn't that the worst? She and I shouldn't have anything to do with each other."

Now that Taniguchi said it, I do feel it's a bit unbelievable. Things that happen more often than is good for them often have another face; I've seen many examples of this.

Taniguchi and I both shut up at the same time, but what we were thinking about was likely different. Kunikida spoke up,

"The chance of two people having the same birthday in a group of thirty people is extremely high. So this actually isn't too surprising, right?"

Even though that sounds like it makes sense, it's hard to believe.

"Should we calculate the odds then?"

No no, it's okay. I can barely stand looking at those weird markings and formulas, even in math class. Don't calculate it mentally either. I don't want to compare my brain with anyone else's. Only Haruhi would participate in that kind of contest. The only type of contest I would ever enter is one where I get to guess who is going to sit behind me when we change seats.

The person sitting behind me is the same one from last year, the one who runs out of the classroom as soon as lunch arrives. I'm pretty sure she's gone to patrol the first-year classrooms. I wonder if the first-years think her behavior is strange.

If there is anyone with even the slightest interest in the same things that she likes, she'll barge right into that class without thinking. As I ate my lunch, I prayed for those new students: don't run to the school office after being frightened by an upperclassman who suddenly burst in. However, since I didn't know what god is in control of these types of things, I was unable to offer a sacrifice of money. I think the god heard me anyway, because when the bell rang for fifth period, Haruhi didn't have those sparkling, bright eyes I know all too well as she ran hurriedly into the classroom. (!)

"How'd the fishing go?" I asked.

"Not one bite."

The tone of her voice didn't have too much disappointment in it. In fact, it's just like her normal, cold, unexcited voice. Her attitude was similar to the time she couldn't find any Arowana in the neighbor's pond(!). That's just how she sounds now. (!)

After school, I walked with Haruhi to the clubroom as instinctively as breathing.

Since we've advanced to the next grade, our classroom has changed. Meaning the clubroom is much closer than before, though it's still not very convenient.

"I think it's convenient enough."

Haruhi said, swinging her bookbag back and forth.

"The cafeteria and store are both closer than before. That's good, because it's really hard to find a place to sit at lunch. I've always wondered why they don't just add some more seats."

This kind of complaint should go to the Student Council President. If you start a petition and give him the signatures, he might actually be able to do something about it.

"I don't want to owe that person anything."

She sped up, all the while shaking her head like a shy kid (!).

"We will not help or support that evil organization. I hate the type of person who starts asking for something in return once they help you a little. That's why I prefer to work things out by myself."

If you decide to start building an extension for the cafeteria, trouble will follow. Also, the money the literature club gets isn't enough for something like that.

"If I was going to do it, I wouldn't bother telling anyone. Besides, everyone would be happy once it's finished."

I advise you to abandon this idea. If you don't, you'll be in the newspapers. Next time I see Tsuruya-san, I'll have to tell her about this and warn her that even if Haruhi asks for help, she shouldn't comply. Tsuruya-san (!), and wouldn't just randomly listen to Haruhi's orders, but I think I should tell her anyways.

I worked hard on getting Haruhi's attention away from the business of the extension.

"So, Haruhi, still haven't found a first-year who's to your liking?"

"Huh?"

Although I am glad that she stopped thinking about the cafeteria, Haruhi's sharp gaze made me feel a bit uncomfortable.

“I didn’t know you cared about that. Surprising, surprising. I thought you would object when I got some new members, but I guess you want some underclassmen(!) too?”

Of course I don’t want any. But, if there was a brigade member lower in rank than me, I could delegate all the tasks I usually do onto him, I would feel more relaxed. (!). That’s not a bad idea. Koizumi’s the ‘Assistant Chief’, Asahina-san’s the ‘Mascot/Secretary/Assistant Chief’, and Nagato is formally the literature club leader/president, though only in name. That leaves me as the only member without a position.

“What? So you want an official position? Then I guess I’ll consider it. But this requires some promotion tests. 5 written’s and 2 practicals.

No thanks, then. The only thing I want is a driver’s license.

“If that’s what you say, I take it you’ve given up. If you beg me, y’know, I might actually agree.”

I’ll be fine with ‘Brigade Member No. 1’. Actually, that’s the best position.

“Mm, so you finally think that?”

As Haruhi revealed that devilish grin of hers, we arrived at the clubroom.

Opening the door without even knocking, Haruhi entered the clubroom as if it were her house. Me… well, I can’t do that, because I wouldn’t want to walk in on Asahina-san changing, so I always make sure before opening the door. I don’t think anyone complains about that habit.

“……”

The only person inside is Nagato.

Sitting at the corner of the desk in her favorite chair, she calmly reads a mathematician’s biography. It seems no matter how fast I get here, she’ll always be earlier than I am. Does she never have ‘cleaning duty’ to do? That’s very possible.

Haruhi put her bookbag on the table, then sat down in the Brigade Leader chair. I put my bag beside Haruhi’s, and sat down in my regular seat.

I listened to the clicking sound of the hard disk running as I survey yesterday’s game of Go, which the players hadn’t bothered to clean up afterwards. It was an unfinished ‘Tsumego’. The mosaic of white and black pieces was placed in such a way that someone was obviously going to win. In three moves black was going to have a semi-victory. If even I could see that, the player must be a complete novice.

“Kyon, tea.”

We should wait for Asahina-san to show up. With her tea-steeping skills, even if she was reincarnated and started talking to a modern-day Furuta Oribe, she would get along just fine.

“That’s going overboard. We don’t need to start talking about tea ceremonies. (!) If you became the founder of the Asahina school of steeping tea, the cult-like tea ceremony school would be heralded as genuine.”

Haruhi’s gaze never left the monitor. She pulled on the keyboard, as if she was about to type out some article. I wondered what type of article as I looked at her suspiciously.

“Oh, yeah, you were writing something yesterday too. Updating a blog?”

“It’s private. A secret document. If it’s found by people outside the brigade, there will be big problems. If there’s a leak, you’ll be the primary suspect.”

Broadly grinning, Haruhi continued pounding at the keyboard quickly. She’s skilled at things like this.

I shrugged my shoulders, walked towards the fridge and took out a bottle of already-made Oolong tea. I poured myself a cup and then some for Haruhi and Nagato too.

Even though I put it right in front of Nagato, she didn’t move a muscle. Haruhi, as usual, just chugged the whole thing in one gulp. I stole a glance at the screen. The PC monitor showed a new typing document.

“Making booklets to hand out again?”

“That’s not it,” was Haruhi’s response, shoving the now-empty cup towards me. “I’m making this in case something happens. This is a test paper. Don’t look at me like that. I’m not telling you to make it.”

Well, who’s the test for?

“That doesn’t even matter. Don’t look at it. How am I supposed to write it if you’re watching?”

Haruhi put both hands over the screen so I couldn’t see, so I returned to my seat.

As I drank my iced Oolong tea while aimlessly putting Go stones onto the board, Koizumi entered the room. While I do usually dislike it, I felt sort of happy he was here. I don’t know why, but today, I felt like that. I thought since he would be very busy today, he wouldn’t come to the clubroom, and if there’s no one to play games with me, it gets very boring.

“Homeroom was a bit long today.”

He explained, closing the door. A smile showed up as he saw the board.

“There’s nowhere I can place a piece, so I surrender.”

And there’s his smile. Since he’s in front of Haruhi, he has to display that all the time, but I think it seems different. Heading for his seat, he cleared the board, and asked,

“One game?”

Sounds good. But I need to go easy on him. It’s not much fun beating the same person every time. I’m not like Haruhi, who thinks wins and losses matter.

“That’ll help.”

Koizumi chose Black, and placed four handicap stones on the board.

And with that Koizumi and I wordlessly started our board game battle. Nagato, like always, simply continued reading. The only sound I could hear was the clatter of Haruhi continuously typing on her keyboard and the sounds of the sports clubs seeping in through the closed window.

A silent Spring day. Tranquil and completely normal; nothing has changed.

After five minutes, there was a quiet knock at the door.

“Sorry for being late.”

Asahina-san entered with her usual timidness, and beside her is…

“やっぼーい！” (!)

Tsuruya-san raised her hand and waved. Her brimming smile brought life to the room.

“Hello everyone, I’m here today to give you all an invitation! Wahaha, it’s for ‘flower-viewing’ part two!”

This time, apparently, it will be at the time of the next Golden Week.

Tsuruya-san gave us those high-class invitations, the ones that look like ‘GanShinKei - 顔真卿’ personally written out using an ink brush, the ones where the only thing I can understand is the date. If Haruhi didn’t read it out for me, I was already planning to visit a museum to get them to explain it.

After Asahina-san changed into her maid outfit - Koizumi and I left the room for that - she started to make some hot tea. The SOS-dan’s unexpected visitor, after the initial ‘Fuha~’, said,

“Last time, we saw the ソメイヨシノ - Somei Yoshino flowers. (!)！ Because, in the olden days, when someone mentioned cherry blossoms, that’s what everyone thought of. My family’s yard

does have a lot of wild cherry blossoms. Even though there are currently lots of moths around, it's still quite pretty."

Tsuruya-san took a sip of her tea, then shut her eyes.

"いにしへの～奈良の都の八重桜～っ" (!)

"[More lyrics], ne?" (!)

Haruhi quickly recited the next line, energetically nodding her head.

"Now, with all sorts of plants able to be raised wherever we want, we should critic (!) some places a bit more. We should wait until after all the other trees have bloomed and wilted, then encourage the ones that are still blooming. Sasuga (!), Tsuruya-san."

There's nothing that describes Tsuruya-san better than 'Sasuga'. Can it be it possible that Tsuruya-san is actually descended from the nobility of the Asuka period?

"How should I know about these age-old matters? It doesn't really matter, anyways! If you really want to know, I could check my family tree, but that takes too much effort!"

The way she speaks makes Tsuruya-san seem very reliable. I hope she will be able to grow old with Asahina-san. Just like the Queens of Hearts and Diamonds. Because if Tsuruya-san is with Asahina-san, no one will be hitting on her. Haruhi? Ahh. She can be a joker. Because you can't do without it in 'Five-card'.

As I was admiring, as always, Asahina-san in her maid dress, Tsuruya-san and Haruhi,

[Four lines of poems. Ogura Hyakunin Isshu no. 33 & no. 35 - two lines.]

Started a reciting contest.

[Ogura Hyakunin Isshu no.66 - two lines]

[Ogura Hyakunin Isshu no.67 - two lines]

[Ogura Hyakunin Isshu no.7 - two lines]

[Ogura Hyakunin Isshu no.94 - two lines]

Now it doesn't even have to do with cherry blossoms during Spring anymore. We've gone into Summer already, possibly even Autumn.

"Fufuu-n? Then, how about this one?"

Tsuruya-san, with an enthusiastic expression,

[Some poem]

“Eh?”

Someone who used to be able to keep up suddenly faltered.

“Does that exist? Whose poem is it?”

Tsuruya-san’s hard question had a very weird answer. I think this is the first time I’ve ever heard that.

“……[Nagato finishes the poem]”

Flipping the page, Nagato answered with her head down.

“源俊頼(!). 百人秀歌.”

“Well done, as I expected of the all-knowing studious Yuki.”

Tsuruya-san cackled and complimented her, but Nagato’s expression didn’t change one bit. And I don’t know why they think this game is so interesting. I’ll ask them later.

Tsuruya-san then said three different poems, and when Nagato answered them, she said, as if satisfied,

“Well then! See you later. Thanks, Mikuru. The tea was very tasty, you know! I’ll depend on you this year too!”

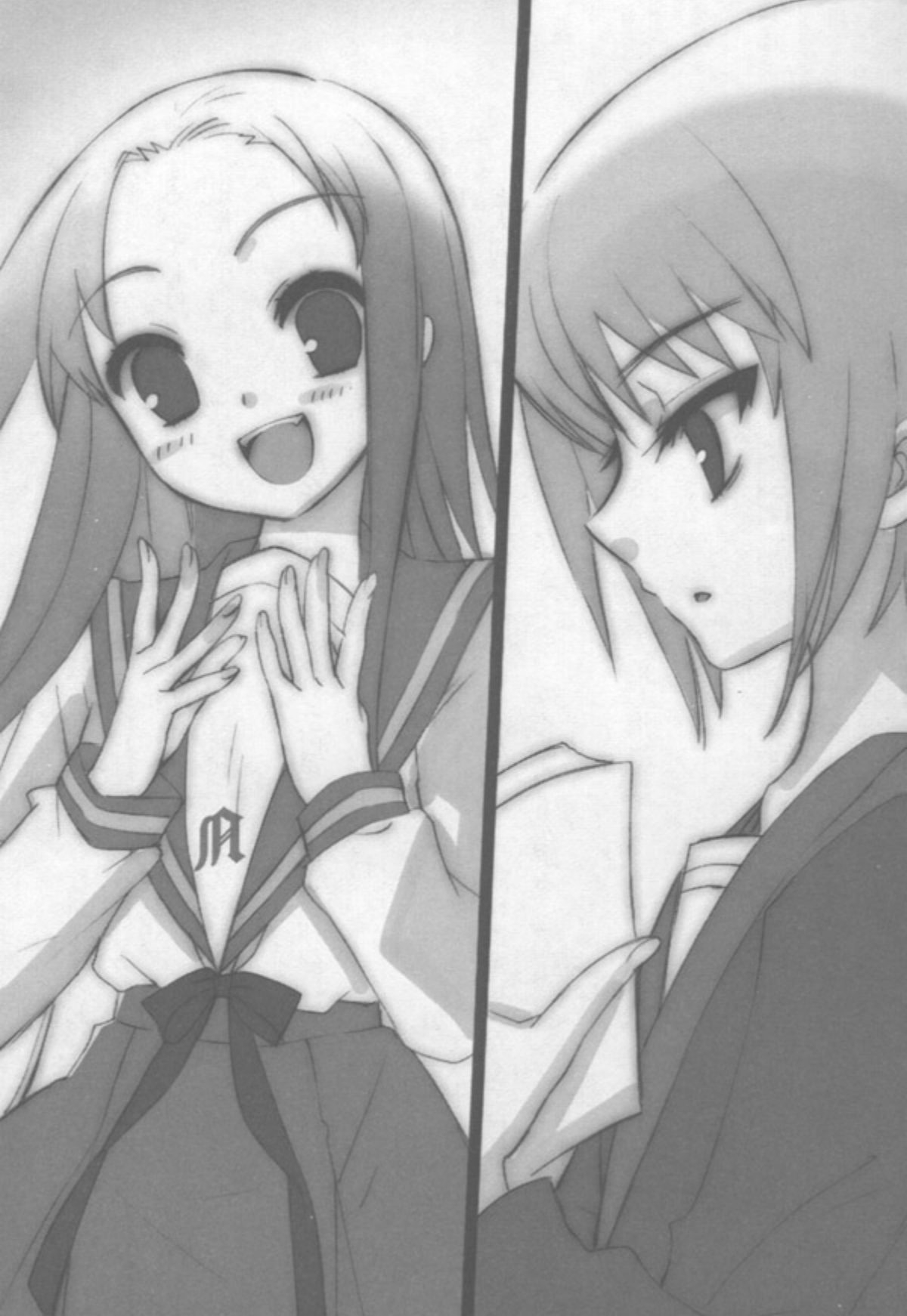
After saying that, she left the clubroom. I think the way she comes and goes resembles the wind. It will leave as soon as you find it…

But Tsuruya-san really is a genius at lightening up the mood. What sort of things would she be bad at? She would be the hardest person in the world for me to imagine how her crying face would look like, she sure is something.

Haruhi continued to sip her tea noisily.

“That takes care of the schedule for the golden week then. Yep, let us all go flower viewing and write some short poems. Make sure you write something that will be recorded in a poetry book and remembered by the future generations.”

Maybe she got tired of typing, Haruhi is now holding the invitation left by Tsuruya-san in both hands and staring at it like some sort of historical artifact. Can’t we write Senryu(comedic poems) instead? Before I could voice my proposal, Haruhi seemed to have remembered something and said:



“Let’s leave it at that for now. I have to announce the schedules for tomorrow first.”

Haruhi jumped onto the top of the desk and made an iron horse stance while shouting with a bright smile on her face:

“Now then! Let the SOS brigade’s first meeting of the new year begin!”

There is no record of the total number of meetings the SOS brigade has had, and Haruhi and I don’t seem to remember either. Which means we can just reset it back to one, since it is the first meeting of the year and all. And the contents of this meeting are as follows:

“This Saturday, which is tomorrow! Everybody gather in front of the station at 9am! Don’t you guys think it’s about time for those mysterious events to make their appearance? We’ve been looking for them for soo long now, don’t you think they are thinking of meeting with us for a change? It’s even Spring to boot! Let’s get them when they’re napping under the warm sunlight!”

We are not talking about Shamisen the wild cat retiree, and that plan of yours isn’t going to work even if you were after some wild cats.

“Listen here, Kyon. It’s almost a year since the brigade’s been established! We don’t have much time left, what do we have to show if we have zero results?”

Show who?

“Ourselves! You can be lax to others all you want, but you must be strict to yourself or you’ll never be anything! It’s like that saying….. was it small profits and big turnovers… no…. self satisfaction… no… trails and hardships… that’s not it either… Mikuru-chan, do you know how it goes?”

“Eh?”

Being asked a random question out of the blue, Asahina-san put her index finger on her jaw and said:

“Is it…… self insured?”

“Was it proper accordance?”

Koizumi said that without moving his eyes off the black go stone. Just when I thought of coming up with one too-

“The words that correspond to that meaning do not exist in the dictionary.”

Thanks to what Nagato said, I gladly give up my turn to come up with something. Maybe you should make one yourself, Haruhi. Something along the lines of respect and properness?

Haruhi ignored me and turned to Nagato.

“Really? I think there’s something like that…”

But the brigade leader that never listened to any of our opinions seemed to agree with Nagato in the end.

“That’s it for the meeting. It’s free time till the end of school!”

Haruhi sat back down into the chair and started typing again.

Just when the last bell that seems to be shooing out all those who don’t want to leave yet out of the school started to ring, Nagato closed her book. Just like someone who can tell the time by listening to the cries of cicadas, we took it as an accurate sign and prepared to go home.

We waited for Asahina-san to get changed and left the club room. The sun is setting already, the wind is a little chilly.

It’s natural for a significant gap to form between guys and girls when we are going down the slope. Haruhi and Asahina-san walked right at the front with Nagato trailing behind them silently.

Me and Koizumi walked together a couple meters behind the three girls. Since this is a rare chance, I’ll ask him about that now.

“How is it?”

“Today’s the same as yesterday, nothing has changed at all.”

Koizumi answered me with his usual smile.

“Maybe I’ve been inferring too much from this. Nagato-san and Asahina-san didn’t seem to have any special reaction to Sasaki-san either. I just hope this type of Closed space is just a one time thing.”

It’s already been quite a few days since the new year has started, Nagato and Asahina-san haven’t even mentioned my old classmate once. But this is only natural after all, since I’ll go crazy if I have to take precautionary measures every time if i want to talk to an old friend.

“You don’t need to do that, as long as that person isn’t Sasaki-san. It’ll only be a problem if it’s her.”

She’s just someone who’s a little eccentric. Plus, we ran into each other by coincidence.

“I can raise both hands in agreement. That’s what I believe too. It’s a fact that is already clear to us, no further explanation needed. What I’m worried about is the one who misunderstood, and those who’re deliberately using this misunderstanding.”

“What do you mean by that?”

I don’t think Kunikida or Nakagawa have any use for that at all.

“Those two friends of your’s should be ok, but-”

Koizumi took off his bag from his shoulder and shrugged.

“Never mind, let’s just forget about that. I just hope it’s a bad hunch. Oh, you don’t need to worry about Sasaki-san. The “Organization” would never do anything to endanger her safety, there’s no reason to.”

Isn’t that obvious? What the heck are you talking about?

“I’m sorry. I was just trying to eliminate your worries, but it seems like that was unnecessary.”

Koizumi turned his head back to the front, with a melancholic smile on his face. If some junior girl were to see that look, she’ll probably turn to mush. I followed him and turned my eyes back to the front and saw the back of Nagato’s head, Haruhi and Asahina-san are walking in front of her while talking cheerfully.

And so, we followed our normal routine and went our separate ways at Koyoen station.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

Haruhi gave me a look that said “Can’t you come early for once?” and left first, with her skirt and ribbon fluttering in the wind. Asahina-san waved goodbye and followed our brigade leader. When I turned back to look for Nagato, I could see her small figure far away in the direction of her apartment.

“I hope nothing happens tomorrow.”

Koizumi said that in a monologue tone. That’s what I thought too…

But Koizumi was too naive, and so was I.

The situation is still advancing steadily, it’s just that no one has noticed it. But the fact is that it already started a long time ago. It’s dragging everybody in one by one, starting from me. It’s not just the SOS brigade either, Kunikida, Taniguchi, Nakagawa, Sasaki, and those who I know and don’t are all being dragged into it.

I still need some time for me to realize what is really going on. Tomorrow? No way it's that fast. But you can say that something close to an omen happened on that day.

Was it just a coincidence, or was it a fated encounter? Maybe it was a part of someone's plan….

The next day, that Saturday morning, 9am. I met in front of the station two of my former acquaintances and was, also, introduced to someone who I have never seen before. I was also told that someone else I know is lurking just around the corner…

That day, I was somehow able to wake up earlier than my sister who uses the alarm clock every day. I followed my new daily routine of pushing the sleeping Shamisen off my pillow, and got up myself.

My body felt refreshed; a feeling that I haven't had for a long time for a holiday's morning. My feet and hands seem to be lighter too. Seems like not relying on an alarm or my sister to wake up in the morning would be the key to living a long life.

I sneaked out of my bedroom and ate a breakfast absent my sister's usual ruckus, then got changed and started to ride my bike towards the station. It sure is early, just a little past 8am. I may be able to arrive before Haruhi if I keep this up. Maybe Koizumi would purposely be the last one to arrive and save me the trouble. It's not too bad for Haruhi to cover the cost for a change, but compared to the measly change in a high school student's wallet, that "Organization" must have amassed plenty of funds. So Koizumi's pay should be pretty good.

Just when I was riding along the road in an elated mood, the pink petals that carpeted the road caught my attention. Looks like it'll only take one more night of rain and it'll be the end of this year's cherry blossom season.

I got off my bike near the station and looked around. I got the feeling that Sasaki would pop out of nowhere. But it's only natural for that self-proclaimed old close friend of mine to be nowhere in sight. I let out a sigh of relief. Koizumi, it doesn't really make a difference to me, but it seems like you don't need to be worried about it anymore.

I looked at my watch, it was still more than 30 minutes before 9am. I really did come early today.

I hummed while I parked my bike in a pay parking space, then walked leisurely towards the meeting spot and discovered that no one was there yet.

But there was no time for me to form a satisfied smile. On the contrary, even the sunlight filled morning seemed to have gotten darker.

"Hey, Kyon-"

Sasaki greeted me with the smile of someone who has successfully surprised another.

“We meet again. This really makes me happy. Maybe it’s different for you, but I really hoped something like this would happen. Although rather than happy, I’m actually more intrigued by it.”

I stood there like a piece of rotten wood, unable to say anything.

Sasaki wasn’t alone either, she was accompanied by two other girls. And one of them was someone who had a face that I would never forget. It belongs to someone who’s on my top wanted list. It’s all thanks to the extra self-control I gained in the last year, that I haven’t pounced on top of her and proceeded to beat the daylight out of her.

“You……!”

“Hello.”

She nodded towards me and smiled.

“Long time, no see. How is your time traveler, Asahina-san, doing? Huhum. You don’t need to look at me like that. We have already withdrawn from such activities.”

The month before, those incidents that happened around mid-february started to come back to me.

The Asahina-san from 8 days later, who I named Michiru at that time. We followed the hints of Asahina-san(Big) and solved many problems. The prank with the can and nail, the boulder at Mt.Tsuruya, turtle and the boy. Plus that mysterious memory chip and that other detestable time traveler…..

And the Asahina-san kidnapping incident.

After a series of car chases, the one who appeared with that new time traveler as one of the criminals, was now standing in front of me. She acted like she was the head of the operation and was also the sole female member. She even kept a calm face against Mori-san’s terrifying smile.

That girl is now standing beside Sasaki, right in front of my eyes.

I have no idea if Sasaki knows what’s going on between me and that kidnapper, but she slowly raised her hand in a attempt to cut in and said:

“Allow me to introduce her, Kyon. This is Tachibana Kyouko-san. She’s……. Well, you can call her an acquaintance of mine. We only got to know each other recently, our relationship hasn’t progressed far enough for us to call each other friends. But I’m very interested in the things that Tachibana-san has told me.”

Sasaki cleared her throat and continued:

“Judging from that look on your face, I’d say the you two have already met. Seems like the encounter was a bad one too. Although that was what I expected.”

“Sasaki…..”

I said that in an oldmanish tone.

“You shouldn’t associate yourself with her. She’s…..”

-Our enemy.

“It looks that way.”

Sasaki didn’t seem to mind at all.

“But it doesn’t seem like she’s an enemy of mine. That’s what’s interesting. She’s told me some incredible things too. Although it’s hard for me to understand, it’s something that feels refreshing to think about. Kinda like mental aerobics. I may not be able to understand it as a whole, but I’m aware of what is going on.”

Tachibana Kyouko, the kidnapper’s lips curled into a smile.

“That won’t do, Sasaki-san. I was hoping that you’d understand the situation, otherwise-”

She looked at me with the begging eyes of a puppy in a pet shop waiting for an owner-

“He would never listen to what I have to say. You wouldn’t listen to what I have to say for more than 3 seconds, right?”

Right. That is correct to the extreme degree. Anyone who kidnaps Asahina-san should be sent to trial without a lawyer. Why isn’t Koizumi here yet? What about Mori-san and Arakawa-san, or the Tamaru brothers?

“Kyon, are you listening?”

Wait a second, Sasaki. I’m looking for someone I can trust right now.

“I’m sorry, but there’s someone else here that I have to introduce to you. Can you please let me go first?”

Who? You can forget about it if it’s that future bastard with attitude problem.

“Although I can guess who you are talking about, you can relax. Since it’s not him.”

Sasaki raised her hand and pointed to the opposite side of Tachibana Kyouko.

“She told me that she wishes to coexist with you within a radius of 2 meters, so I suppose it’s not that bad to introduce you to her. Since it could be troublesome for you if we just let her be. She’s…. I guess she’s someone I know rather than a total stranger.”

I looked towards the direction of Sasaki’s hand.

At first I couldn’t comprehend what I was looking at.

Something that looked like a drop of black ink inside a glass of water, hazy and fog like…… is what I saw. It took me quite a few seconds before I realized that I was looking at a Youkoen girls school’s uniform.

At the same time that I realized what I was looking at, that girl gave me a feeling that she’s been there for more than a hundred years. Just what is this feeling?

This would be the first time I have met someone that I can accurately describe using that ancient phrase “Out of this world”.

“Huh……..?”

It’s our first meeting for sure. There’s no way that anyone could forget a girl like that if they happened to lay their eyes on her.

But why is it that I can feel a chilling sensation like something from snowy mountains in the winter? I feel like I have experienced something similar before……

She slowly raised her head, and I got goosebumps all over me the instant I saw her face and that expression. She must be a ghost, definitely not human. It’s impossible for it to be a human.

“_____”

That girl, with a face paler than Nagato’s, has indescribable black glass-like eyes and hair that’s dark like a crow sprayed with a can of dark tainting spray. Her hair extended below her waist, with strange wave-like curls. It resembled a big and heavy mop. Her hair spreads and extends onto both the left and right sides, you can say that it covers the majority of the surface areas. It really stands out, it’s so strange that I wouldn’t be surprised if she suddenly grew a pair of wings and flew away. Although it’s impossible to overlook someone like that, why is that I didn’t notice her until Sasaki introduced her? Isn’t that abnormal? Was she invisible before?

I quickly checked my surroundings. The pedestrians only made a passing glance at Sasaki or Tachibana Kyouko occasionally, but no one seemed to notice her existence.

“Who are you?”

“_____”

She just stood there without making a sound, she doesn't even blink. She looked straight at me, with a look like she's trying to find a specific pigeon out of the flock that's in front of a shrine. It feels more mechanical than any machine, even the lens of the cheapest camera would look more alive than her eyes.

"_____"

That expressionless face somewhat resembles Nagato's, but it's a completely different type. The manufacturer and maker are completely different. If Nagato is a piece of ice out in the wilderness, this girl would be dry ice. She won't even melt, she would just evaporate into nothing.

The pale lips seem to have moved out of obligation.

"_____Ah…."

To my surprise, those heavy lips spit out human speech instead of white smoke. But it moved very slowly, after a while it started to say some things I never expected.

"My mission_____ to observe_____ This is_____ a place_____ where time…. moves slowly. Temperature____ very humid."

That voice sounded extremely drowsily it's almost deathly. The color of that tone is comparable to those old monotone films that are full of sepia flakes by now.

She moved her gaze away from me.

"___ This time…… no mistake…. you…. will____"

I can't understand anything she said. This situation seems to have overlapped with my memories. But what's this similar yet different déjà vu like feeling?

"____ I'm ____"

She continued slowly.

"Kuyoh ____"

Just when I wanted to ask how to spell that.

"Suou ___"

"Ah?"

So it's Kuoh Suyo?

"…___ Suou ____ Kuyoh ____"

What? Which is it? Is her head short of at least 5 gears or something?

The sound of Sasaki's light giggle brought me back to reality.

"Kyon, she has always been like that. Isn't she interesting? I just call her Kuyoh-san. What she lacks isn't gears, but a solid definition of individual. No no, it's not an illness. That's just how she is. I can't think of any other ways to explain it."

But this Kuyoh woman's ability to communicate is far worse than the Nagato I met for the first time…… Eh? Nagato?

- Don't tell me, they are somewhere close?

- It's possible.

The SOS Brigade's group lodging of the winter holidays. The snow storm at the ski resort. The hotel that appeared like a mirage.

Nagato fainted in that place because of fever. We were able to escape that place with the help of a hint that Nagato left us combined with Haruhi's intuition and Koizumi's knowledge. It feels like a daydream to me now.

An alien life form that's different from the Integrated Data Sentient Entity- The Macrospatial Quantum Cosmic Existence.

"So that's it…"

I stared at her like I was trying to carve her face into my brain cells.

"So it's you. The alien that's different from Nagato."

"____ Ali…. en___? What's___ that___?"

"Drop the act!"

It's easy to see what is going on even for me. Tachibana Kyouko the kidnapper is the opposition of Koizumi and the "Organization". That future bastard would be Asahina-san's opponent. The answer is clear if you use the elimination method. Nagato's opponent would be her, Suou Kuyoh. I almost said that out aloud.

I remembered what Koizumi told me on the way back from Tsuruya estate.

- Lets use this example. Let's say there a kingdom called A and another one called B - There's also C the opposition force against A and D the opposition of B - If C and D become allies -…

So it's finally here. If Nagato's IDSE would be F, then she would be part of G's first wave.

She looked at me, with a look like she was looking at the carvings on a copper clock-

"___ Your ___"

Kuyoh talked in a voice that's like an old and off tone tape:

"Eyes_____ very _____ pretty."

And spat out that perfectly meaningless line.

In conclusion.

She is a interface that's cruder than Nagato, Kimidori-san or Asakura Ryoko. It's pointless for me to try and ask her origin, which is meaningless anyway. I have no intention of getting along with her to begin with.

"Kyon, I knew you would say something like that."

Sasaki held her stomach in a attempt to stop herself from laughing and said:

"All I have is these two. Because no one else would get close to me. Does North High have a lot interesting people like Kuyoh-san? It would be great if that's the case, but it's a pity that I'm not a student of North High. No matter how much I complain about it, I still have to stay there for 2 more years. I must play to my heart's content when I get into the university I'm aiming for. That's what I have planned."

"Sasaki-" I said to my old friend. "Do you know what they are?"

"They told me. So I know. It really is something that's unbelievable. If you had asked me if I believe it or not before, I wouldn't have a clue on how to answer you."

The laughing eyes of Sasaki's that are looking at me have now narrowed into an irregular line.

"But I know now after that reaction of yours. They are the real deal."

She cast her gaze towards Kuyoh and Tachibana Kyouko.

"A humanoid android made by aliens, an esper with limited powers, and a time traveler right? Although it's hard to take in those 3 cards all at once, but I'm starting to believe it now."

Stop mixing around with them, Sasaki. It's for the best to not get involved with those things. You'll just turn into another me. Damn it. Leaving that monster Kuyoh aside, I'd probably act differently if this was the first meeting between Tachibana Kyouko and I. But because we have already met each other in a bad situation before, I just can't soften up my attitude towards her. Even if I try to sway Sasaki now, it would be useless against someone who's clear-headed and sharp-eyed like her.

The leader of those criminals, Tachibana Kyouko, now has a warm and harmless smile on her face that's impossible for anyone to think of her as a criminal. Was what she did in February just an act for this moment? If that's so, then it must be the same for that future bastard too. Where is he?

Just when I was looking around suspiciously, Tachibana Kyouko said:

"He said something about not wanting to do stupid things like this. He should be somewhere. But it seems that he won't be showing up today."

She pronounced the word "today" differently, relaying that bastard's message.

I don't want to see him either. If possible, I don't want to meet those two mysterious girls in front of me too.

"It can't be helped, since no matter how much we delay it, it will happen someday. Besides, we have waited for a long time already, isn't it about time for us to show up now?"

Tachibana Kyouko closed her mouth and giggled,

"He must be thinking about the same thing too. Something that's meant to be will be. No matter how much you delay it, there's always something that you can't get away with. Wouldn't the wound be lighter if you get it over with quickly?"

She stressed the pronunciation of the word "he" this time, I thought she was talking about the future guy. But I was wrong.

Tachibana Kyouko looked behind me, her gaze passed through me like I was invisible. A chilling sensation instantly ran up my spine. I sometimes thought that the expressions like chilling or fear are used often, although the true meaning or feeling that it represents are rarely felt. It's like a drawing of a mouchi or kamo carrying a leek.

Everything has been blown away. There is no mistake. This is it. My heart is now filled with a chilling fear that's impossible for me to describe.

I turned around slowly.

Koizumi is standing behind me. He probably got here from the station's ticket booth. He's dressed in a casual but faultless outfit with his hands tucked in his pockets, standing there nonchalantly like he's been waiting for me to notice him.

It would have been good if it's just Koizumi. Since he's the only one I can count on in North High to debate with those three.

"Uuu……." Another bead of sweat dropped down from my forehead.

It's the worst case scenario imaginable. Haruhi, the absolute person in power of SOS Brigade, is standing beside Koizumi. She's staring at me with the look of a government official who's witnessing the wrong doings of a local magistrate, with Nagato and Asahina-san behind her.

That is to say, the entire SOS Brigade is now present at the meeting point. Furthermore, they seemed to have formed a human wall that's used to block free kicks to block out me and Sasaki.

I looked at my watch and found that there's still 15 more minutes before 9am. I have no idea when they arrived, even though I'm technically not the last one to arrive, it still looks that way with all the others already standing there.

But now is not the time to be pondering over something so trivial.

Haruhi has now locked her gaze onto mine and is now stomping towards my way. The other three followed like maids following a princess. Koizumi who always tirelessly dressed faultlessly for every occasion, Nagato who's always wearing a uniform with no explanation, and Asahina-san who's wearing a fancy spring outfit.

I felt like an air traffic controller who has seen an ultra-low atmospheric pressure that's accompanied by an enormous sea of cloud on my radar screen.

Haruhi stopped in front of me, with a look like those drug sniffing dogs at the airport who have caught the scent of marijuana.

"I thought it's a rare occasion for you to come before us. What? You have another appointment before ours?"

"We just ran into each other."

Sasaki answered. She didn't look at Haruhi, her eyes were on me.

"Seems like if you live near here, it would be natural to choose this place as a meeting point. I have promised to meet my acquaintances here. Kyon, just like you, I too make new friends at places you don't know. Since those that I've been waiting for have arrived, it's time for us to get going."

That's great. I'm sorry, but please hurry up and be on your way. But please don't go into the coffee house that's nearby, since that's where we are going. It would be troublesome if there were no seats left.

"Ok, I'll think about it. It would be awkward to meet up again just after we have parted. We'll take the train and go somewhere away from here."

Sasaki answered after understanding my intentions, then bowed toward Haruhi.

“Suzumiya-san, I’ll leave Kyon to you. He still doesn’t put any effort in studying and extra-curricular activities even in high school, right? Unless he gets back on track before his mother’s patience runs out, he’ll be forced to go to cram schools like in junior high. I think she should reach her limit around the upcoming summer vacation.”

“Eh. Ah. En.”

Haruhi squeezed out some random sounds in order to evade not being able to say anything. Her eyes were wide open like a kid who discovered a bug he had never seen before in the mountains.

If this is all part of someone’s plan to shake me up, then those two really are more than enough. But no, I realize that there really is more on top of everything.

It’s normal to see high school students stand in front of a busy station on holidays, it’s something that you see all the time.

But, on a certain corner of this street, something huge has collided. Although it seems to have made no sound at all - but I think I have heard something that should not be audible.

At the same time as Sasaki was smiling at Haruhi, Tachibana Kyouko and Kuyoh were looking in different directions. The image of our stylish vice commander from head to toe has appeared in Tachibana Kyouko’s eyes.

They did not talk at all. Itsuki’s smiling pokerface did not change one bit. Even though he is radiating an air of annoyance, it seems I’m the only one who noticed.

On the other hand, Tachibana Kyouko has a satisfied smile like a female actress being on stage for the first time.

But those two are not the source of that sound. Such a shockwave can’t be produced by two human beings facing off.

It’s something that’s causing me to lose my mental footing, like the continent plate and the oceanic plate are colliding far underground. And the source of that sound is-

“……”

“——————”

Those two that are staring at each other without moving are Nagato and Kuyoh.

I remember now, that’s right, I have seen Nagato get really angry a couple times already. Like the time when we were having a game showdown with the computer research group or when the student President tried to suspend the Literature Club. At the time when she was fighting Asakura I didn’t have the extra attention to see her expressions, it’s also possible she didn’t have that emotion back then.

But now, I have finally understood.

This ability to read Nagato's emotional changes that I'm so confident in, was still middle-class level.

That expressionless Nagato's steely firm and expressionless eyes were now radiating an emptiness that could pulverize your spine. In her transparent like pupils, is the image of the different alien-made android that calls herself Kuyoh.

The noisy surroundings and the passing pedestrians all seem to be far away from here. It wouldn't feel weird even if a giant mantis broke the ground and climbed out.

This loss of reality feels just like being trapped in a different dimension-

"Ah, uhmm….."

The one who dispelled me from that is a fairy who has come down from the heavens, the one who is also the support of my optic and protectiveness nerve-

"Kyon-kun? What happened? You don't look so good…."

Asahina-san looked up at me with a worried look.

"Did you catch a cold? Ah. You are sweating. Handkerchief, handkerchief."

She reached into her pouch, took out a flowery handkerchief and handed it to me.

I snapped out of my trance thanks to that.

"I'm ok, Asahina-san."

I don't want to dirty your pretty handkerchief. My shirt sleeve is enough for the job.

That future bastard has my temporary gratitude. Because he isn't here, Asahina-san doesn't need to glare at someone else like Koizumi and Nagato.

I wiped my sweat, while suppressing the feeling like a reporter being pushed onto a live broadcast of a presidential election support speech without a script.

"Kyon, I'll be going now."

Sasaki who was talking with Haruhi said.

"I almost forgot, can you call Sudou when you have time? Looks like he's officially preparing for the gathering. He called me again a while ago, seems he wants to put you in charge of informing the North High region."

Why did he tell you that instead of me? Maybe Sudou's really interested in Sasaki instead of Okamoto.

"That's impossible."

Sasaki said that without thinking.

"I never did anything that may have made anyone like me. I never showed affection to anyone either. You are probably the one who understands that the most, right Kyon?"

Nope, I got no idea.

"Is that so?" Sasaki giggled, "Then that's ok."

Sasaki raised her hand after saying that puzzling line.

"See you later."

She walked past me and continued towards the ticket booth, Tachibana Kyouko and Kuyoh started to move silently too. The former had a look of someone who has just finished all of their tasks and the latter was like a dark cloud that's slowly drifting away.

Koizumi and Nagato acted like they were meditating and didn't say anything at all, only Asahina-san bowed nervously. You really are someone who can put people at ease regardless of the location. You are so lovely that it's making me dizzy! I love you Asahina-san, I want to hold you close in my arms!

After seeing the three disappearing into the station, Haruhi murmured:

"She really is a queer character. Hmmm, but she is one of the more interesting people you know. Although she feels a bit artificial."

She would probably take what you said as a compliment, Sasaki's like that.

"I thought as much, she seems to have more friends than you too."

It's true that she is considerably more sociable than me. But, Sasaki-

I held back my sighs, and thought:

You don't need to go and befriend aliens, time travelers and espers. Even if you want to expand your social circle, there's still limits.

I probably shouldn't be thinking about it. My head isn't working properly right now.

Tachibana Kyouko's opponent is Koizumi. For Suou Kuyoh it would be Nagato, the nameless future guy would be against Asahina-san…….

Then what about Sasaki? I had completely forgot about her.

I had never thought about who she would be going against.

Several minutes later after parting with Sasaki and the two extras, we went to the coffee house like fulfilling some sort of obligation. That would be listening to Haruhi's rant about what she had planned for today.

I shouldn't be treating everybody this time. It's the second time that I'm the first one to arrive, it's something I should be celebrating about, but I'm not happy at all. Maybe it's because it didn't feel like I was waiting for anyone till now. I still can't forget about the day that I was waiting for Haruhi by myself when Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san were absent. Even though I still paid for her, it's still memorable.

"We met at the ticket booth this time right?"

Haruhi continued while drinking her American Ice Cream Float noisily:

"Therefore no one is late. You just arrived first. Therefore we'll just pay for our own things this time."

What's with that "Therefore"? You even used it twice. It makes you sound stupid by repeating the same conjunction twice, and don't go changing the rules either. Maybe next time I'll come here while doing the Oklahoma Mixer (!) dance with Nagato and Asahina-san.

"That's a no go."

Haruhi shook her straw with her mouth.

"You can't plan it beforehand and pretend it's a coincidence. I'll say this now, I'm not that easily fooled. You'll have to pay the ten times fine if you get caught."

Who's going to investigate that? You won't get caught if you make sure to say the same thing anyway. Haruhi's probably on top of the Fair Trade Commission's list. But let's forget about it, since one will have to pay the ten times fine in a fixed period and need a loan from the bank.

"About today's activities-"

Haruhi finished her cold drink and looked around at every one, I did the same and looked at the other three.

Asahina-san held her glass of Ceylon tea elegantly with both hands and listened to Haruhi's words enthusiastically, Nagato stared at the surface of her apricot water and Koizumi had his usual smile with his arms crossed.

In regard to the appearance, there is no change to the SOS Brigade members. Ignoring Nagato, Koizumi's unwavering business like smile is really praise worthy. I'll make sure to mention that when I talk to those two later.

The following scene would be us drawing lots to decide the groups, is what I thought.

"I've decided to not split into groups."

Is what she said.

"I thought about it before, maybe we can't find anything because we tend to divide into two groups of two and three. After all, it is easier to discover something when there's more people searching one spot. Five is over two times more than two."

Haruhi give me an interrogatory look:

"Especially you, Kyon, you weren't looking for those mysterious things seriously, right? You were asleep in the library before."

So you still remember that. I looked at Nagato and Asahina-san from the corner of my eyes, they seemed a bit uncomfortable.

"Hey, Haruhi, what are those mysterious things again? Sorry, but I forgot most of those things you said before. Can you tell me about those again?"

"That's the basic of the basics, so make sure you remember them this time."

Haruhi brushed some hair away from her cheek.

"Any incomprehensible occurrence is ok. Something that can't be explained or someone who's mysterious, temporal disturbances, aliens pretending to be human, and many other similar things."

Most of what you just said can be explained by these guys here — I thought that to myself and sighed.

I'll have to have a good talk with Koizumi and Nagato in another time. It's too risky to try to talk with those two without Haruhi noticing if we are moving around as one group.

From Koizumi and Nagato's complexion, and the fact that Asahina-san is still the normal Asahina-san, plus there isn't another me that has come back from the future trying to fix things, it seems things shouldn't be that bad.

Besides, there's something that's more important right now. I peeked at Haruhi.

Looks like she's really concentrating on finding those mysterious things. It's all right then if that's the case. There's no need to reassure myself or panic.

Our raison d'être-less SOS Brigade has already sailed through many storms, it's now completely out of control and roaming around randomly. As long as the course is still unclear, it'll just continue to ignore the marine traffic safety code and run all over the place. It's not unlikely that a voyage which started by aiming for an Indian subcontinent would end on the top of Mt. Ararat.

Sensing that Haruhi was going to get up soon, I hurriedly gulped down the remaining melted ice in my glass.

"Ok, let's go!"

Just as Haruhi was pushing the receipt towards me out of habit, she seemed to suddenly remember the declaration she made before and acted nonchalantly while picking up the straw in her empty glass with her mouth.

We walked around near the station for several hours after that.

Some of the buildings that weren't here a month ago seemed to have appeared out of nowhere just a bit off the main street, there are also some buildings that seemed to have evaporated into thin air. Although all of this seems a bit fast, maybe it's normal in today's commercialism-infested community. Has the bar near my house that existed before my birth been left behind by time too? The convenience stores that seem to have just opened suddenly close shop, and more take their place, just like Russian roulette. Although that's a scene that one should already be familiar with, you would still feel strangely at ease if the scenery hadn't changed at all.

The thing I'm most thankful about is that we didn't meet up with Sasaki's group again. Although I'm prepared for them to pop out from a corner, it seems that they really did get on a train and have gone somewhere else. I'm still not very happy about the fact that she brought the other two here, but it seems that she is still considerate of others. I'll have to thank her for that.

The five of us moved around together for the whole day. We had lunch at a curry restaurant with unique dishes that the owner is proud of, looks like he opened the restaurant as a hobby. We did the same activities in the afternoon. I feel like we three are just accompanying Haruhi and Asahina-san for window shopping, it's probably the same from other people's perspective.

Asahina-san who's looking at the miscellaneous goods corner of a fancy shop with sparkles in her eyes, Haruhi trying out various sunglasses on Nagato in front of a optometric shop, Koizumi who's been making small talk with topics like the weather or his classmates-

Today passed so ordinarily, it's somewhat strange.

Aah, it was a enjoyable day. There's nothing to complain about.

On that night.

After the new year's first mystery search tour ended without finding any mysterious phenomenon, I hurried home as soon as Haruhi signaled the end for today. I ate dinner and went idle for a while, then went into the bath after my sister.

I washed my hair with a shampoo that's cheaper than the ones for cats, and went into the bath tub after washing off all the dirt and dust, just when I was humming the tone of my sister's self-composed song that's known as "Dinner time song", the bathroom door suddenly opened.

"Kyon-kun -Phone -"

My sister who's already in her pajamas poked her head in.

So I got a call. I thought I would get a call anyway. I have some business too. I'm prepared to have a talk with Koizumi or Nagato. My sister held the receiver with a big smile on her face.

" 'Is Onii-san home?', I answered 'Kyon-kun is.' "

Can't you call me using the former too?

"Who is it?"

"It's a girl-"

My sister said that in a weird tone, I wiped my hands on the towel I placed on my head and took the receiver from her.

"Ah, Kyon-kun, you have to help me with my homework after you get out of the bath. Arith~ matic~ drill~~ nn~~"

After she finished that toneless song, she poked out her tongue at me and skipped out of the changing room like a kindergartener.

A girl who would call me at this time?

Who else but Haruhi? Maybe it's Nagato because of what happened this morning? Could it be Asahina-san?…… don't tell me it's the (big) one. I'm not in the mood to listen to some strange advice right now.

"Hello."

To prevent accidentally dropping the phone in the bathtub, I put my head out over the edge and placed the receiver to my ear.

“Hello.”

And that echo-like voice is—

~~

Chapter 2

α-1

“Hello.”

The voice echoing from the other side is a female voice that I had not heard before.

It isn’t Haruhi, it isn’t Nagato, not Asahina-san from any time plane, not Mori-san, not Sakanaka, much less Tachibana Kyoko or Suou Kuyoh, or the one with a little possibility, Sasaki. One can know it after hearing the first sentence. The voice does not come from anyone I know of, a voice that has never entered my eardrums before.

“Ah, are you bathing? Sorry! I am too impolite. Why don’t I call back later?”

That isn’t necessary. However, just before I could say that…

“But, but, if I call too many times it will be very… I’m really sorry.”

After continuously hearing that incessant voice come through the headset, I stopped her.

“Who is this?”

“Its me. Me, just me~”

No, you are not Haruhi, and so that is not considered a formal introduction.

“How is it possible you don’t remember…”

The female voice said. Since it’s coming from the phone, it’s not very clear. The owner of the voice spoke in a jovial high pitch.

“But it is alright. I am only planning to say hi to you. Your younger sister is so cute! I want a sister just like her! Arithmetic drills~…… Hehe, so cute.”

Eh? I haven’t heard this voice before, but her tone and style of speaking seems very similar to someone else’s. But no matter how hard I search in the recording stores of my brain, I’m still unable to find it. I only felt that it is a voice with a childish tone sounding like that of my younger sister.

“I only wanted to hear Senpai’s voice.”

The owner of the voice said.

“It is only this, there are no other special purposes. If there is a need to trouble you next time, please take good care of me. If only we could be together for a longer time.”

Wait, did this person call me a Senpai? Meaning younger than me? But, the voice indeed does not exist in my memory. Just when I wanted to tell her to “at least give me her full name”……

“I am going to hang up. So chat again soon. If there is a chance, hehe.”

Click.

The opposite party hung up in a rather impolite manner.

What exactly is this? Just a newly-reunited old friend Sasaki, Tachibana Kyoko and Kuyoh is enough to bug me, I do not wish to see more new characters appearing in this time frame.

I suddenly had a stroke of inspiration and took a look at the call lists, only to find out that the other party had used a private number.

All the way till the time I finished bathing and put on my pajamas, I continued to question myself on who exactly is the girl who called, and the end result is a waste of time.

“What exactly is wrong with today……?”

But I guess no matter what I think is useless, I should just go with the flow. If it doesn’t work, no matter what, I will make sure it does. If there are any surprises, I will discuss it with Koizumi, Asahina-san, Nagato …… and an infinitely long distance to Haruhi, in order from easiest to hardest. Till then, I could ignore whatever that happens.

“How troublesome.”

Tomorrow is a full day of rest, something that is extremely hard to come by, as long as Haruhi doesn’t come up with any strange ideas before I sleep, Sunday is going to be relaxing.

To prevent myself from catching a cold after a bath, I hugged Shamisen like a heat bag and walked towards my younger sister’s room.

β-1

"Hello."

The voice echoing from the other side is a female voice that I had just heard this morning.

If it was Haruhi, Nagato or Asahina-san (big), it would still be alright. Haruhi would at most be telling us what naïve plans will be carried out tomorrow. If it was Nagato, I would have to discuss with her the measures that can be taken to deal with Kuyoh. For Asahina-san (big), I still have many, many things to ask her about.

"Ah? Are you bathing? Your younger sister should have told me. Why don't I call you back later? But since you already answered the call, according to my predictions, you should be done and coming out soon, right?"

It was not anyone I had imagined. I said the name of the owner of the familiar voice.

"Is this Sasaki?"

"Yes, it's me. As for today's incident, I originally wanted to talk to you for a longer time, but Suzumiya-san arrived a bit too early. I am afraid this is a miscalculation on my part."

Sasaki laughed in her cluck-cluck voice.

"But your younger sister hasn't changed one bit. I'd already told her my name, don't know if she didn't hear it or if she forgot about me already..... but I guess it cannot be helped, we have only met twice..... no, thrice.

"If you wanted to be my younger sister's tuition teacher, I think you had better not."

This is one of my rare contributions to the family.

"I understand. How would I snatch your cute younger sister away? While there are billions of people who don't know each other at all, those whom one is related to in blood are only the few members in the family. This causes the ratio on the difference on both sides to increase. This is one of those things in the world that must be viewed seriously; as they say, blood is thicker than water."

"So, what is it?"

"I will be direct then. Nine in the morning tomorrow. Hope you can come to the old place in front of the train station. You know the place right? I guess you should, even if I mentioned only the old place part. As for what is going to happen..... well, actually it isn't me looking for you, and I guess it is time to listen to Tachibana-san directly. According to my considerations, I think you will understand this better than me."

"Those fellows are coming, aren't they?"

I felt very irritated the moment I remembered the quiet and alienate Kuyoh.

"He should be coming as well. He is called... well, that self-proclaimed time traveler guy."

This made me feel worse. If that idiot talks some rubbish about Asahina-san again, I have no confidence that I can control myself this time around. If I lose control and end up beating that guy up, you shall be the one to stop me.

"So you are saying that you will be coming? Kyon, don't worry. Those three hope to come to terms without coming to blows. If we can exchange our opinions by just talking, no matter who it is, it would be better that way."

Let's hope that alien understands Earth language. Speaking of that.....

"Sasaki, where did you go with them today?"

"You wanted evidence to prove that I am not there? We took the train to the city and walked for a few rounds. Tachibana-san is really nice to hang out with. She even talked a lot about her high school."

Sasaki calmly added.

"And, about the incident four years ago."

Four years ago.

12 A pun on the fact that the incident from Melancholy took place four years ago.

Because when I first heard about this was last year, and back then it was already three years ago. This is a keyword that everyone often talked about and caused them to shake their heads. That is when Haruhi used some sadistic superpowers to cause something major to happen till now. We can now host the Olympics[12].

"What did she say?"

"You should ask her about this directly. I am still very confused now. Oh yes, Kyon, actually I am very unsettled now. It is like I am going to attend a swimming lesson tomorrow and yet not knowing how to swim(!), like an elementary school child."

I remembered my middle school days when Sasaki stood and waited beside the pool. This person is indeed a girl. When she is mingling with other girls from the class, she seems like a normal girl. The only thing out of the ordinary would be her above average communication skills and her shining eyes when she is talking. Indeed, other than when talking to males, she is a common middle school, and now a high school, student.

It had always been like that, but why must Sasaki call me and discuss such strange topics? This is indeed something not common at all. Must be a mistake somewhere. Whose fault is it?

"Sasaki, I know that you are now the messenger of that group. But, I really don't understand, why must you do something like this?"

Sasaki, on the other side of the line, remained silent for a while before breaking into a laughter of deep thought.

"This is because I am your good friend, more than the others. If someone asked you out, you wouldn't be so obedient would you, after all you are not one who is so easily tricked, although you are quite easily defeated in a debate of words."

I had never thought of defeating you in a debate of words.

"You have indeed the qualities of a listener, with the right amount of intelligence, as well as that of innocence. Don't get angry, but reporting something you know the other party already knows is kind of meaningless. But for this, if the other party is Kyon, then there is nothing to worry about. You give others such a feeling, a feeling of being able to talk to you freely."

I kept having a feeling that this doesn't seem like you praising me; but since these words came out from the mouth of Sasaki, they would be instantly understandable. Speaking of which, it had always been this way since long ago.

"To not interfere with your younger sister's studying I'll be hanging up now. I also do not want you to lose your opportunity to wield the power of a senior. Make sure you wake up punctually tomorrow or I would've wasted my time flipping beds and cupboards upside down digging for the contact list of my ex-classmates. It would be easier if there was at least a contact number written on the New Years' card."

I am going, of course I am.

13 Identification Friend or Foe. Basically a system of determining whether something will be beneficial or harmful to himself or herself.

I had long wanted to clarify things with them. There is no need to confirm anything by IFF[13], they long had enough information for me to classify them as an alien, time traveler and esper foe. Since they had decided to come together and not operate separately, it allows me to waste less effort.

"Be careful not to catch a cold after bathing. And, please say hi to your parents for me."

The phone lightly hung up.

I hurriedly got out of the bathtub, put on my pajamas and hurried towards my room.

β-2

I speedily picked up the phone Shamisen was lying on and called. Somebody picked up after only a few rings.

"This is Koizumi."

The way you always remain on standby to pick up the phone as soon as possible is something that I really admire.

"Because I felt that you would be contacting me very soon, in fact it seemed to have come a bit later. I originally expected you to call right after we were dismissed."

I called you immediately after Sasaki called me, if this is still considered late, I guess I have to put superluminal particles in the phone line.

"Seems what we are talking about isn't of great concern. So that is why, is it the other side that contacted you? No, I actually expected you to call me no matter Sasaki-san called you or not. Didn't you have some things to ask me?"

"Do you know that Tachibana Kyoko girl?"

"Of course I do. After all she is someone who has no similarities with the 'Organization', which means she is from a competing faction."

I really wanted to know what kind of competition it is. It shouldn't be some war with guns at a secluded corner I suppose. Don't tell me it is a war with superpowers in sealed realities?

"If that is possible, it would be really interesting. Unfortunately, this is not something that is so simple. Because she is not able to enter the sealed realities created by Suzumiya-san…… It is just that Tachibana Kyoko and her group is not much different from the 'Organization' I belong to. We had activities due to similar interests but each of us have our own explanations to them. I guess it can be put that way."

And that is the so-called legendary theory about the new world created by Haruhi three…… no, four years ago?

"Although the inability to prove the theory causes it to remain an assumption, if we put it more simply this is how it will be. There are many believers in the 'Organization' as well. Regarding the fact that the source of our powers being Suzumiya-san, it is something that we had agreed upon. This point can be made without any exaggeration. All members, including myself, had already agreed with it."

What about Tachibana Kyoko?

“That is why I said she is one of those representatives that doesn’t have powers bestowed upon her by Haruhi. Yet she just thinks that she does, making her different from us. A bunch of people refuse to believe Haruhi is a god. They could have been innocent bystanders, and yet somehow knew about these things and wanted to appear on the stage, although I understand how she feels as well.”

Koizumi’s explanation seemed to be carrying some expression of pity.

“So, what did Sasaki say?”

“Tomorrow, I will be meeting them.”

I told him everything Sasaki said.

“Don’t know why, they seem to have something to say to me, and I have something to say to them as well. Even to the extent of giving them a earful.”

Koizumi chuckled a few and continued.

“Let me add on. Tachibana Kyoko will never carry out any acts of violence against you or Suzumiya-san. Regarding the kidnapping incident, she is actually disapproving of it. The problem lies with the inability of some people to control themselves after believing the honeyed words of the time traveler. And to them, you two are equally important. The one that is dangerous should be the opponent of Nagato-san. Her thoughts are harder to decode than that of the Integrated Data Sentient Entity.”

After telling me to “Please be very careful”, the emergency telephone call between Koizumi and me ended. The reason why we did not have a longer chat is because I know Koizumi should know what I am trying to say with these. If I am kidnapped then, I would have to trouble you.

“After that……”

The next is Nagato.

I am able to remember her phone number clearly even without using a phone book.

This time round, the phone rang thrice.

“……”

“Nagato, it’s me.”

“……”

“Regarding tomorrow……”

Although there is no reply, just from the silent breathing, I am able to tell who it is that picked up the phone. I continued the phone call without any form of response. All the way till I mentioned "And so tomorrow, I will be meeting the alien I met today." before she replied……

"I see."

I heard Nagato's voice, devoid of any emotion.

"Unless Sasaki was lying, they plan to solve the problem peacefully. Koizumi thinks so as well. That is why I decided to consult your opinion."

"……"

And after a period of silence, one that lasts as long as looking up a word on the dictionary……

"The immediate moment is of little danger. This matter can be approached without concern."

Because this came from Nagato, it is very convincing. I felt my body suddenly relaxing.

"The Integrated Data Sentient Entity is currently analyzing their reports."

"Is there any actual information captured?"

"Not yet, the only things determined are that it is a macro-spatial quantum cosmic existence."

"Did you manage to successfully communicate with that fellow named Kuyoh?"

"Unable to find common link. Thought process remains unclear."

The riddling alien still remains a riddle?

Just when I am wondering whether I could catch that Kuyoh woman and pass it to some alien development organization, Nagato suddenly continued.

"Their salutation has been standardized temporarily."

"Oh, tell me about that then."

"Sky Canopy Dominion."

Without considering any dramatizations, Nagato revealed the name in monotone.

"From what we see, they came from above the sky."

α-2

After finishing my younger sister's homework with her, I left Shamisen with her and returned to my own room. I picked up the phone lying on my bed and called. Somebody picked up after only a few rings.

"This is Koizumi."

The way you always remain on standby to pick up the phone as soon as possible is something that I really admire.

"Because I felt that you would be contacting me very soon, in fact it seemed to have come a bit later. I originally expected you to call right after we were dismissed."

I am not such an impatient person. Although in actual fact, I needed some time to conclude my own thoughts.

"What exactly is going on regarding those guys from this morning?"

"This is something I wanted to ask you as well. But you need not speak too much of anything regarding Tachibana Kyoko. I had already expected their group to run out of patience and start taking action. The kidnapping incident back then is just a foreshadow to what is about to happen next, although we cannot say it is something that is caused by Tachibana Kyoko."

Didn't expect you to speak for the other side.

"I hoped to prevent any needless competition as well. A violent confrontation is totally not my style. Fortunately for all of us, Tachibana Kyoko is someone who can be communicated with, albeit only just so. A rational opposition is better than an ignorant ally, this is something that is worth being a classic. If possible, it would be best if they can just remain bystanders. This is a suitable time for action, which is the same situation as when 'spring is near when winter began'. This would be much better than remaining in a cold war isn't it?"

Can you not use words that will cause attrition to my nerves?

"Or there is another possibility. Maybe the time traveler gave her some weird ideas. We should also not forget even Nagato-san's opponent has made an appearance, they would have to take action now."

What exactly are those fellows trying to accomplish?

"Honestly speaking, Tachibana Kyoko's group and the 'Organization' I belong to are totally unrelated, although there are not many major differences. We had activities due to similar interests but each of us have our own explanations to them. I guess it can be put that way. It is just that they wanted to minimize and purge instances of the possibility of them making mistakes themselves. This I understand very well, because this is equally valid for me as well. The reason

we can have superpowers is because Suzumiya-san bestowed them upon us. This is a fact that could not be wavered."

And that is the so-called legendary theory about the new world created by Haruhi three…… no, four years ago?

"This is not a matter of believing or not believing. Even if we remove the 'god' from the salutation, 'Suzumiya-san is the source of sealed realities and Avatars, and the reason we exist is to control the situation' is a fact that is agreed upon. Because I knew of this since the beginning, if we say it is otherwise only now, I will be very troubled. So this is something I am not willing to make concessions on."

It would be best if we are debating to solve this problem, Koizumi said with the tone of a bystander.

"Tachibana Kyoko and Sasaki-san will still be fine. At least, they live in the same time as us humans, with the same values, making them easier to monitor. The one that is totally unpredictable would be that one not belonging to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity, with no other similar party other than Suou Kuyoh herself. From this point, she is the monomer that still exists on Earth. Since we do not even know what methods she employs, much less will we know about her motives. Compared to her, time travelers and the like can even be said to be 'cute'."

Although Asahina-san's cuteness is something of an obvious fact, I do not think all time travelers are this way.

"I agree with this as well. Asahina-san, who is part of our team, falls under the category that protects the target. After all she is a senior with irresistible cuteness, we can't possibly leave her alone. It is just that we do not want them to bring their future conflicts to the past. I guess problems regarding time travelers should be solved by time travelers themselves."

Or it will be too irresponsible. Koizumi added.

"Anything other than this can be settled by Nagato-san and myself. You too, if you see any evil arms reaching towards Suzumiya-san, you will definitely not sit still right?"

Of course, she is our brigade leader after all.

"We will just wait for the other party to take action. No need to think too much about it. No matter what, we still have Suzumiya-san on our side after all."

β-3

Just as I finished with the phone call with Nagato my younger sister had already brought along all her work to look for me, probably due to her impatience.

But thereafter she immediately threw her practice questions and stationery on the floor and started fooling around with Shamisen. After my younger sister had enough fun with Shamisen and finished her work, an hour had passed. She undoubtedly has the same blood flowing through her veins as mine, not much talent with academics. She can do the four fundamental operations of arithmetic easily, but if the question introduces a twist somewhere, she cannot continue.

I returned to her her practice questions booklet, written on it the answers I had worked out for her, along with the lesson notes for the day, saying the following.

“Go to sleep as you have finished, it would be best if you could bring Shamisen along. He always presses on my blanket and is so heavy I feel uncomfortable.”

“Shami~ want to sleep together?”

The calico cat raised his head and looked at my sister with doubt, and proceeded to move slowly towards my blanket.

“He says no.”

My younger sister seemed to be very happy as she hugged her work, skipping happily like a dancer as she went out of the room. For my younger sister, this is considered obedient. I shall give you a bonus point for this one.

I conveniently turned on the television. Although there are obviously no shows to watch, I changed channels randomly while pondering about the event tomorrow. I think it is better to be slightly prepared.

Might as well sleep earlier tonight.

α-3

After talking on the phone with Koizumi, I wondered whether I should give Nagato a call as well, but after thinking that it is already so late and that there is nothing much to talk about even if I did, I returned the phone to the side of my bed.

If Kuyoh is like a death god that will determine the survival of Nagato or something like that, she would of course not remain silent. What's more tomorrow is a Sunday, a normal weekend our merciful leader bestowed upon us. I shall use the time to take a good rest and recuperate.

Once Monday comes, whatever reluctance would still have to be faced in the classroom or the clubroom. If I pay a visit to the clubroom during lunch time, I should be able to listen to Nagato's alien seminar anyway.

Just when I was about to take out that book that I haven't returned to read it, a scratching sound came from the door. I opened the door and Shamisen crawled in, its throat producing croaking sounds and a face filled with exhaustion. Without even greeting the person who opened the door for him, he climbed onto the bed, rolled into a ball and started sleeping away.

This seemed to symbolize that the world and cats' lives are eternal(!).

α-4

The next day, Sunday.

I didn't have much to do; I just read some books, played some games, fully enjoying the time spent alone. Uneventfully, it passes to evening. This rest day without any link to Haruhi and related incidents is great, though sparse.

Tomorrow is about to start. The melancholy-inducing Sunday night is about to pass, the start of the week with the only reason for existence is for weekends to come quickly, a new day of a week with an odd number.

Monday is about to come.

β-4

Next day, Sunday.

I had already woken up when the morning turned seven. Thirty minutes after the alarm clock rang, I was fully prepared and entered standby mode for departure from home.

I had never before felt that breakfast and washing up are such a waste of time as I have today, their being morning routines I have gotten used to performing long ago. Originally, I could have slept another wink, but if I went back to sleep, I won't wake up for another two hours.

Without a choice, I can only read the morning papers in the kitchen. Right at this time, my younger sister, who is extremely proud of her achievement as being the earliest to wake up in the entire family, stared at me intently with a look of disbelief.

"Wow, Kyon woke up earlier than me for two days in a row. Why~?"

What is there to 'why' about? I am now living the life of a high school student that is much busier as compared to a sixth year grade school student. You will sooner or later reminisce about the time when you were the current you, so you should enjoy your grade school life to the max. Don't write things in your graduating speech that would make others laugh at you.

"Ohh~ where are you all going today? Will Haruhi be there too?"

If answered honestly, she might want to tag along. Although Sasaki would reveal an understanding smile, that time traveler guy would definitely carry a look of disgust. No, I should just let younger sister come along, after all it is considered a way of getting back at them.

"I'm meeting some middle school friends today."

But, I eventually decided to conveniently send her away. There would be plenty of chances to meet Sasaki later on; also, I do not wish to have my younger sister, one who still believes in the existence of Santa Claus and had a pure and innocent upbringing, to know the hard truth so early. Aliens actually being extremely clever, time travelers being brats that piss people off et cetera…… destroying fantasies like this seems a tad too cruel.

You stay at home with Shamisen instead. And, if Haruhi calls the house, you go think of some reason to cover up, whatever reason is up to you. But you have to be careful, you are not to mention even the 'Sa' of 'Sasaki'.

"O~kay."

My younger sister rushed off to wash up, creating thumping noises.

Now is the chance. Although it is still quite early, I think I had better set out now. If I were to be questioned by my younger sister later and end up leaking anything, the consequences will be

troublesome. I feel uneasy all over being at home, as well as an unbearable urge to wrap up today's activities A quickly as possible.

But just as I stepped out of house, I realized that my occasional habit of being an early bird has incurred the wrath of the heavens.

Just as though the weather is waiting for me to open the door……

"It's raining already?"

I returned back to its original position the key to my bicycle I originally intended to use, stretching the other hand to pick up an umbrella before saying said phrase.

From a slight drizzle to a pitter-pattering plum rain and then to a thunderstorm with dark clouds obscuring the entire sky. This entire process takes less than thirty seconds.

Although there is no thunder.

I endured the pattering of the rain as I approached the train station, spotting the trio from yesterday waiting for me.

Sasaki carried a blue foldable umbrella, Tachibana Kyoko a branded "Fen" something one. Like a genetically-similar replica of Nagato, Suou Kuyoh donned the uniform of her girls school, carrying a transparent umbrella that looked like it was bought from a convenience store, a demonstration of the totally different personalities of the three in the heavy rain.

Kuyoh's extraordinarily long black hair, although having already exceeded that of those that could be covered by an umbrella bought at a convenience store, shows no sign of being drenched by the rain. She also seemed to have turned transparent to the unrelated pedestrians. However, to prove that theory wrong, those pedestrians, upon hitting her umbrella, would move away immediately. This is really convenient.

Oh yeah, that time traveling brat hasn't shown his face yet. Did he turn into some chameleon sticker by any chance?

"No, he is at the coffee shop."

Sasaki replied.

"I would never wait blankly for a person in such huge rain, even more so the person is you…… that is what he said. So we let him have a seat away from the rain."

What a self-righteous person. Seems the person's character hadn't changed a bit even after two months. Although I have no idea how many days had passed for him.

“Seems you and him have really deep hatred. Although I haven’t heard of anything regarding the incident from you, but I guess this beats not knowing each other at all, this is good.”

Sasaki laughed in her usual way.

“I am not worried now. Because if he really had some ill intentions, I suppose he would not have taken such a direct approach. He took a similar approach with me as well.”

That is even more unforgivable. Shouldn’t come if he hates this time frame. At least learn from Asahina-san. To find someone who works so hard for the tea-making business is not simple even in this time and age.

Sasaki laughed softly.

“I wanted to drink tea brewed by Asahina-san too. I could if I visited North High right? What a waste, I should have visited during the cultural festival last year. I will definitely go this year.”

I would of course not say things like “it is better if you don’t appear.”

“You coming is of course not a problem. But our cultural festival has nothing too interesting…”

“Both of you……”

Tachibana Kyoko suddenly invaded into the space between Sasaki and me. In order not to hit our umbrellas, she held hers high up.

“Can casual chat be left to when only the both of you are around? The reason I called for you today……”

Tachibana Kyoko cleared her throat with an “Ahem” sound and looked darkly at Sasaki and me.

“……is because I have plenty to talk to you all about. This is something very important. I should have told Sasaki-san before.”

“Sorry”, Sasaki said, smiling. “I did not forget, just that I am pretending to have forgotten. Honestly speaking, I do not know how to say those things out loud.”

In this period of time, Kuyoh remained motionless like a model made in a 1:1 ratio. Is she really not used to our kind of language?

Following that, Tachibana Kyoko said.

“We better get going. I have a premonition that ambassador from the future is more or less running out of patience in that shop. It is about time too.”

14 A popular Mahayana Buddhist Bodhisattva, usually depicted as a monk. An old man, on his way home, discovered a statue of Ksitigarbha standing in the harsh cold winter, buried in the snow. The kind old man decided to leave one of the

Just as she said that while walking off, Kuyoh started moving without even nodding her head, moving slightly faster than Ksitigarbha[14] with an umbrella carrying a heavy sack moving along a walkway covered with snow, following closely behind. On her face that is lacking any tinge of scarletness is a pair of sleepy eyes that makes people wonder whether she had already fallen asleep. I don't know if the alien here has low blood pressure or is unable to handle the humidity, making it seem as if her state of being changes daily. If Nagato is described as diamond dust, then Kuyoh gives a feeling of peony snow[15].

15 Diamond dust refers to the effect created by falling snow during winter under light while peony snow refers to snow that falls only during spring's warm yet moist condition.

Looking at Sasaki and Tachibana Kyoko, it is as if they had already taken Kuyoh as transparent. But I suppose they did that because they knew even if they ignored her, she would follow anyway. Regarding this point, it is rather similar as compared to Haruhi and Nagato.

Kuyoh expressed an expected movement. Although the steps are not very large, there is no feeling of it being slow as well, continuously maintaining a similar distance from us. And I, while walking, discovered……

The direction we are heading in is the meeting place of the SOS Brigade since god-knows-when. It is the coffee shop where ninety-nine percent of the time, it is a particular member, me, who will pick up the tab.

As I had predicted, the duo walking in front paused in front of the automatic sliding glass door, and a man holding onto a glass with a face full of unhappiness could be seen inside.

That fellow raised his head up and discovered us, but all he did was to curl his lips uninterestedly.

Just like when I met him near the flower bed, it is a Koizumi kind of smile that has been made evil.

There is no need to imitate the SOS Brigade to such a stage, making me feel uneasy all over. And the me now is sitting at the exact same spot yesterday with the same member formation, beside me is Sasaki and opposite are the supernatural trio.

After the female waitress left after leaving four drinks on the table, the five mouths, including mine, show no sign of movement.

I am staring at the time traveler guy whose name I still do not know till now, Sasaki and Tachibana Kyoko with a look of relief. Kuyoh is as stiff as a clay doll, not making any sound.

The atmosphere is like when a final meeting is being made by the army inside a castle that is surrounded by a huge opposing army, ready to fall anytime……

Automatically picking up the bundle as the emcee is Tachibana Kyoko.

“Although many things happened……”

With this phrase as the opening statement.

“I am really excited now. Do you all know how many days I have waited for this day to come? We can now finally stand at the starting line now. Thank you for giving me the chance.”

She lowered her head and bowed at me.

“I would also like to thank Sasaki-san, suddenly troubling you for such a matter, I am really sorry.”

“Hm.”

Sasaki uttered a simple syllable, raised her head and looked at me.

“Kyon, can you not show such a scary expression, at least listen to her first. I wish to refer to your conjecture, because you should be more knowledgeable with matters like this. After all my intuition and analytical skills are not that superior, and thus I chose to rely on previous examples and experiences of others. Because of this, your presence here makes me more relieved, since I have nobody to refer to this time round.”

I adjusted my gaze away from the face of the time traveler of similar origin as Asahina-san – the face that would not be able to bring any benefit to my eyes no matter how I look at it.

“Make this short and simple.”

I tried to sound as serious as possible. But all I got in return is a cold laugh from the time traveler. How infuriating.

“Why don’t you give us your name first?”

If you remained as an anonymous time traveler guy all the time, my perception of you would only become worse.

Facing my second round of staring attacks, the guy with the face full of sarcastic expressions produced a voice that I had awaited for two months.

“Names are just a sign of acquaintance.”

That ridiculing tone is no different from the one in my memory. He shifted his body for a bit, seemingly uneasy.

“I don’t mind whatever you all call me. There is no purpose to that at all. That is just like you people changing Asahina Mikuru to Asahina Michiru. Totally pointless.”

What a lover for negative sentences. I should have given my sister a ticket of approval and let her come along. Just a sentence or two from this guy is enough to bring one’s emotions to the bottom of the pit. And how could Asahina-san be pointless?

“Although you said that.” Sasaki said to that fellow. “At this time and age, even if it isn’t a real name, a salutation would help to make things easier. Even a governmental position or a status, for an ancient Japanese imperial guard or a governmental representative, that kind will do. Just tell Kyon.”

“Fujiwara.”

The time traveler unexpectedly replied.

“Just call me that.”

“That’s what he called himself.”

After hearing him give a name that is very obviously made-up, Sasaki shrugged her shoulders at me.

“In that case, the self-introduction of every member has ended.”

I suppose this counts as knowing each other’s name. But I did not come here to know all these. After all I can address you all as time traveler (guy), Asahina kidnapper and Sky Canopy Dominion alien, no concern about salutations at all.

“Um.” Tachibana Kyoko followed. “Next we move onto the main topic.”

After deliberately “ahem”-ing a few times to clear her throat, this esper girl who has an alien and a time traveler sitting on each of her sides revealed a smile of the door-to-door salesgirl.

“We believe the existence of the real god is not Suzumiya-san but Sasaki-san here.”

A bomb dropped suddenly.

I kept the cold drink in my mouth without swallowing, the thought of spitting it on her face flashed through my mind for an instant, but almost immediately decided against it, and so returned the glass onto the table while swallowing the drink before saying.

“What did you say?”

“No, that is what I said. Are there any parts that are difficult to comprehend?”

Tachibana Kyoko revealed a bright expression and gave a great sigh of relief.

“Phew…… it is finally said. I always wanted to tell you this. But because there is always no chance to do so, remained in my heart for quite a while. It would be better if Koizumi-kun isn’t around. I even thought of transferring into your school this spring, but those people are really scary. I had reaffirmed this point not too long ago, I really do not wish to see that Mori-san again.”

That satisfied expression while laughing jovially is no different from a normal high school girl.

“This is how it is. Just like how Koizumi-kun is bestowed with the responsibility to ensure Suzumiya-san’s safety at all times, we have to do the same for Sasaki-san as well. But, both the aliens and time travelers had joined Suzumiya-san’s side. This causes me to feel very uneasy and helpless.”

She looked at the two persons beside her and continued.

“To prevent destruction by a similar body, I can only do this. Koizumi-kun has Asahina-san and Nagato-san but we don’t. Thus, we need a similar replacement and it is finally assembled now.”

This is not something to be trusted just anyhow. If Haruhi is not the kind of godly presence in Koizumi’s words, I have to ask myself what the heck I have been doing the past year. Nearly being killed by Asakura Ryoko, in actual fact I was stabbed once, an endless summer break, time traveling to and fro, receiving orders from an anonymous future, even more important is that of being fooled around by Haruhi’s sudden impulses, Nagato’s rampage…… if Haruhi isn’t the mysterious events generating machine, won’t all of this be impossible to happen?

“This is one of the views, one of the realities. But the reality need not necessarily be limited to one only. The surface is just a false façade, while the truth is hidden way below the surface kind of thing, isn’t it a very common style employed in detective stories?”

If you wanted to discuss mysteries, look for Koizumi. On the other hand, if you want to discuss about novels, look for Nagato instead.

“Sasaki” I said, “Do you really believe in all these?”

Sasaki, who was flipping through the café’s menu, raised her head.

“Hm, honestly speaking, I had always felt intrigued. I am not too interested in myself and have no strong desires. If I could be raised to the status of being godlike just like this, I think it is best if it could be avoided. Even when playing American football, I prefer playing as the quarterback. I would be happy if I could live a life without bringing trouble to others. I especially hate people who like to make a big deal out of themselves. I would feel very offended when I see people like these around.”

Sasaki waved her hands to catch the waitress's attention.

"Oh yes, we haven't ordered anything yet. Has everyone decided?"

That prankster smile is exactly the same as those she revealed in the middle school classroom.

The waitress who is dressed simply with an apron wrapped around casual clothes came forward immediately with menus, during this process, the only sound made by the entire crew is that of Sasaki's "four cups of hot coffee" only.

Time traveler Fujiwara and alien Kuyoh did not respond, only exhaling a "hmph" sound from the nostrils, while giving an expression of being immersed in eternal speechlessness. I really want to know what the people around us think about us. Even if we reluctantly think towards the bright side, it would be very difficult to think that this is just a meeting of high school students. I increasingly felt that compared to a situation like now, SOS Brigade appears much more normal.

Tachibana Kyoko, who first started talking, broke the ice again.

"This would be it. I believe you would have heard of it from Koizumi-kun as well right? The matter about Suzumiya-san creating this world about four years ago. She has a strange power, and yet is not conscious of it herself, unknowingly creating sealed realities. Koizumi-kun and the rest were suddenly awakened and formed the 'Organization' which continued till now. Suzumiya-san kept having her wishes come true, bringing aliens and time travelers to her side. But, my companions and myself believe that this power should lie with Sasaki-san."

It is just purely thoughts after all. Thinking has no shackles to limit it anyway. But it will be different if actual events had already occurred. This is a country governed by law, and kidnapping is a major offense.

"Regarding that incident, I would like to apologize. But, this doesn't seem very likely to succeed right from the start due to strong interference from the future. It is only an attempt. I have no plans of succeeding at all, but at least it is not fruitless, since we can inform you of our existence. This is considered a great step forward already."

If I am the moon, I would probably be wondering "why are you leaving strange footprints on me?".

"Four years ago."

Tachibana Kyoko narrated the events as if she is telling her friends something that happened in the television serial shown yesterday.

"I suddenly felt that I had received some form of power without any omen. It is something that I had knowledge suddenly. Since I do not know the reason, I would much less know why me. What I know is that I am not the only one turning this way, there are other companions too, and this originated from one person."

That shining pair of eyes casted beside me.

“And that is Sasaki-san. Even before I thought about it, I already knew you are the person who granted me the powers. I immediately started looking everywhere for Sasaki-san, on the way meeting my companions. Everyone has the same belief as me.”

I recalled the members of the kidnapping syndicate who got off the van.

“Just when we are discussing whether we should make contact with Sasaki-san, and if we were, how, there was something very strange. I don’t know why, but there seemed to be another group very similar to ours, and those people are very similar to us too. However, they seemed to be concentrating on a person that is not Sasaki-san.”

And that is the ‘Organization’?

“Yes, they are the ones who treat Suzumiya-san with godlike status. And conflicts broke out between us, thinking that their opinion is wrong. In order to correct them, we met them many times as well. And yet they said we are in the wrong and refused to believe us no matter what. We are unable to accept their views, much less for them to do the same. Finally we talked about breaking off……”

Tachibana Kyoko nonchalantly looked afar before turning her gaze back quickly.

“Since then we have not met at all.”

“And after that?”

I said. Could there be any more views?

“So, I wanted to ask you how would you want it?”

This representative from a faction opposing the ‘Organization’ let out a huge sigh.

“We firmly believe the powers Suzumiya-san are holding onto now originally belonged to Sasaki-san. However there must be a mistake somewhere that caused it to transfer to another person. And therefore, I hope to change things back to how it was. In that case, the world will definitely move in a much better direction.”

After that, she looked at me straight.

“I hope to have your help.”

“Sasaki.”

I escaped from her line of sight.

“Whatever this fellow said, what are your views?”

“I do not wish to have these unknown powers.”

Sasaki spoke with a voice of clarity.

“Although it is not something to be proud of, not only am I an introvert, I am also a below average mortal. Even if I acquire those humongous and unexplainable powers that are beyond imagination, it will only wither with time. I will definitely end up with some mental problem. Hey, it is better if it can be avoided.”

“She said that.” I said. “Even the person said that herself, why don’t you just give up?”

“Do you seriously feel it is better to leave things this way?” Tachibana Kyoko showed no sign of retreating. “Do you seriously wish to have Suzumiya-san in control of these powers? Even in the future? In that case, you wanted to be fooled around with by Haruhi for the rest of your life? Do you know that this does not only concern you, but it is everything in this entire world that will be fooled around with by her!”

That gaze full of urgency turned towards Sasaki.

“I would like to invite Sasaki-san to reconsider. Compared to Suzumiya-san, you are more suitable. This is something that would never be wrong. You do not have to worry about anything. You just have to continue living in this world unknowingly. I am very sure that Sasaki-san would not twist the world upside-down. I know you can do that.”

Sasaki fixated her gaze upon me. That smile that seemed to be asking me “Really?” is again totally similar to the one I’ve seen in middle school.

My head started to ache. I also know that Tachibana Kyoko is very serious regarding this issue and very candid about it as well. Whatever she wanted to say, I have understood to the extent of being impossible to understand further.

16 A spiritual teacher from ancient India and the historical founder of Buddhism. He is universally recognized by Buddhists as the Supreme Buddha of our age.

If there is a need to make an assumption, Haruhi is like a time bomb, except without the timing readout. Even the timer is totally random, impossible to predict. And thus an explosion cannot be predicted as well. A person like her, for some reason, had the mystical power to control the world. Unless one has the benevolence of Sakyamuni Buddha[16] or Jesus Christ, would be unable to bear with it.

But, this is a conclusion that is made under the circumstance that she is not aware of the aforementioned.

I understand it very well, so does Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san. But, that girl does not know about it all. It is just like this, it is just a very straightforward and innocent problem like this.

I faced Tachibana Kyoko again.

“I am of course able to understand your theory, but what do you plan to do now? No matter how one thinks about it, Haruhi indeed has the ability to defy all laws and realize wishes to a certain extent, although it isn’t a good thing. For example, making cherry blossoms bloom during autumn and things like that. But, doesn’t Sasaki have such a power now? Wouldn’t that be impossible then? No matter how you insist that Sasaki is a god or something, the reality would not change.”

Haruhi would usually not really let her subconscious drift too far from reality. You can even say they do have a bit of logic if you look at them differently. The most is her use of wish papers in temples to bind me to a lowly position in the Brigade. That person seems to love this current world quite a lot as well, and would no longer do strange things to destroy it already. As for sealed realities and Avatars, it is only a shortcut for Koizumi to earn some extra pocket money, not really something of great danger.

“It is really so.”

Tachibana Kyoko changed to an expression of sadness.

“Although it is really so, but I always felt that Sasaki-san would be more suitable. You might understand Suzumiya-san very well, but you should understand Sasaki-san equally well right? After all the amount of time spent together is about the same too.”

17 When a person scores a ippon in judo, they win the match. An ippon is scored when the opponent is thrown onto their back, pinning an opponent for 25 or 30 seconds, or for opponent submission.

Third year middle school and first year high school would of course be very similar from a timely perspective. But, the closeness is different. I did not form some strange brigade together with Sasaki to waste time outside school, as for the amount of conversations, Haruhi wins by scoring an ippon[17]. She always sits behind me in class and slaves me around in the Literature Club clubroom after school. This is an unchanged rule since the formation of the brigade. And while I had activities with the SOS Brigade, there is a one year gap where I had no form of communication with Sasaki. Even if I had a habit of maintaining very good relations with an old friend, I can’t possibly just leave the current activity grounds like this. Not only Haruhi, Nagato, Asahina-san and Koizumi had been with me for so long, I also help them sometimes. Even if for that three brigade members, I cannot possibly change Haruhi to other people, and do not wish to.

Even if one recalls that Haruhi is a mysterious bomb that puts any ideas popping into her mind right into action, I cannot possibly just leave her alone like this. I haven’t even shown her the trump card yet. Won’t that be an opportunity to show the better side of myself in a major crisis?

“And I think Sasaki would not agree. I think it is better if you stop now. Koizumi would still be okay, but if you do anything to irritate Nagato, Haruhi will explode in a chain reaction. At that time, I do not know what would happen.”

“And that is why I hope to deactivate Haruhi’s powers so that you all would not have to worry all day.”

Tachibana Kyoko put her palms together, as if praying.

“We are not even thinking of our own benefit, just look at Koizumi-kun, just maintaining the status quo is already so difficult, but if it is Sasaki-san, there would not be a need to. I am really hoping from my heart for stability in the world.”

“Even if you put it this way I can’t help it at all.”

Sasaki let out a small sigh, and turned towards the direction of the counter.

“Our hot coffee is coming way too slowly.”

She fiddled with the ice cube in her glass with her fingers while acting nonchalantly.

“Kyon, I suddenly have a query. Grade school student, middle school student, high school student, university student…… Of all these names, why is the high school student written differently from the rest? Is this something worth thinking about……”

“Sasaki-san!”

Tachibana Kyoko seemingly hurriedly screamed out loud, but immediately lowered her head, embarrassed. She seemed really disheartened. I am starting to sympathize with her. You really found the wrong target. Although to me it could be a little…… but Sasaki, among my friends, is someone who is very normal. She is not the kind of idiot who would agree immediately when others ask whether she wanted to be a god.

Hey, I am sounding more intelligent already.

If Sasaki is still Sasaki, then no matter whom she must go against, she would never agree. Tachibana Kyoko seemed to have found the wrong person. She is not this kind of person.

I used my fingers to point at the other two who just listened without contributing: Fujiwara and Kuyoh and said.

“What do they think then? I know you wish to make Sasaki god, but what do your companions think? Have they reached a consensus too?”

Of course, the reason that I would ask something like this is because judging from the expressions on the two weirdoes, I predict that they did not really take Tachibana Kyoko’s

opinion to heart. Fujiwara seemed really bored while looking at that cold glass, Kuyoh did not look at anything, just staring at the ceiling with a look of blankness.

Tachibana Kyoko, with her brain drooped low, looked left and right through the gaps between the strand of her hair, upon seeing no response from the time traveler and the alien, drooped even lower.

“Oh yeah, this is one of the difficulties as well. They have no interest in cooperating too.”

After hearing Tachibana Kyoko’s voice that sounded like she is about to cry, Fujiwara laughed in an irritating way.

“That is obvious. You talk about cooperating? I am not going to stoop as low as to work with the people in this time frame. I only came here after considering that I might be able to contribute to this time frame. Turns out there isn’t much to expect.”

Listening to his kind of tone, if Tachibana Kyoko does get angry I will help to chip in a few words as well. He continued.

“It doesn’t matter whoever it is. Whether it is Suzumiya or Sasaki, if we only consider the natural occurrences, there will be no difference at all. Individual humans do not have great value. The power of extracting the time, the power of changing the universe, we just have to take note of these. As long as the power exists, it doesn’t matter whose hands it is in.”

“You should think so too right?”

Kuyoh did not give any response to the time traveler. Her fluffy hair having no sign of movement in the slight breeze from the air conditioning, she remains dazed beyond imagination, sitting on the chair, feeling as if she doesn’t even know where she is. Is this fellow really in front of me? Even if she is sitting in front like this, her presence is now thinner than the word thin can define and is nearing zero. Don’t know if I should say that she lacked thickness, I think even the electronic monitoring system at a construction site has more life than her.

Just as the atmosphere is once again threatened to be enveloped by silence…….

“Hmph! You all are really……!”

Tachibana Kyoko whizzed up and snatched the first word.

“Stretch your hands out.”

She had her gaze upon me with seriousness.

“Instead of using words, it would be easier to just let you experience it for yourself. In that case you will care about what I say. Just a while will do. Stretch your hands out.”

Just as if she wanted me to look at her hand, she stretched out her smooth and supple hands.

Just as I wanted to check if I am drowning, pondering whether I should hold onto her hands as well, Sasaki touched me with her shoulders.

“Kyon, please just follow Tachibana Kyoko-san’s instructions.”

I stretched out my right hand. Tachibana Kyoko’s moisturized fingers held onto my palms and proceeded with a further request.

“Close your eyes. It will be over in a minute.”

I reminiscenced this familiar feeling while I followed her instructions. My lightly closed eyes can sense the brightness of a light, the ears that became more sensitive due to decreased sight picked up sounds that are not noise but that of classical music. This piece should be by Johannes Brahms.

But……

“You can open your eyes now.”

The emergence of the voice of Tachibana Kyoko matches the time when the background music disappears.

I slowly opened my eyes.

I could see Tachibana Kyoko with a smile, holding onto my hand. There is only Tachibana Kyoko.

My surroundings are in complete silence. There is no Sasaki, no Kuyoh and no Fujiwara. Other patrons and staff had disappeared elsewhere. Just like a mass disappearance, just like Mary Celeste, everything disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Tachibana Kyoko and I sat at the same spot on the table, still holding onto each other’s hand.

“What……”

My eyes started moving by themselves. In the ambient lighting of this café, there is only the two of us left in this empty shell. What exactly happened here? Just when I wanted to say that, I suddenly felt a sensation of having experienced this before, and at the same time recalling it. A clone of the same place, nobody around…

“sealed realities……”

“So this is how Koizumi-kun calls it.”

Tachibana Kyoko let go of my hand and whizzed herself up.

“Although we cannot exactly describe it as a visit, but why don’t we take a walk outside?”

Tachibana Kyoko, like a fish in water, invited me outside.

My heart thought that just sitting down would not help much either and so I agreed. I haven’t been to a sealed realities for a while already. In fact, I had only come twice, once with Koizumi and the other with Haruhi. This is the third time, and it seems a lot like the one Koizumi sent me to by cab.

I walked beside Tachibana Kyoko and watched how naturally the electronic sliding glass door opened. This is like how it is usually too. I don’t know what the theory behind it is, but for some reason, there is electricity in this world too.

Walking outside, the first thing I did was to look up at the skies.

The rain has stopped. Wait, there is not even a cloud. The sky is not in a shade of gray. It seems there is no sun too, the light looks like it is part of the sky. The entire world seems to be enveloped in a foggy radiance.

“Walk for a bit.”

Even though the entire street has nobody at all, giving me the vibes of a ghost town, it did not really have such a huge blow on me. This is exactly as how Koizumi had described.

The difference is……

I had previously entered two sealed realities, both of which are covered in darkness. Although it could be because it is night, but I still remember the sights in that world with clarity.

However, this world is filled with creamy whiteness: milky white on top of a rarely-seen radiance. Compared to the sealed realities in my memory this seemed much more cheerful.

There is an even bigger difference. No matter how one turns his or her head, there are no lifeforms around. Those huge and alienate lifeforms can’t be missed by the eye so easily.

“Hehe” Tachibana Kyoko turned her head back. “Hm. You are right. There wouldn’t be such things around here, and they do not even exist at all. This is my top recommendation. This is a good place right?”

Grayish-white monsters, rash and destructive-prone lifeforms, are the result of Haruhi’s subconsciousness.

“There are no Avatars here, and there are no signs of them appearing. This is what my five senses are telling me. This sealed reality does not have anything that will threaten its existence.”

“Isn’t this a sealed reality?”

“It is a sealed reality? It is the same kind of dimension as you know.”

Tachibana Kyoko seemed very happy to tell me this and continued.

“It is just that the creator of this world is different. This is not a world constructed by Suzumiya-san.”

Other than Haruhi who has the ability to create such a world……

“Yup. It is Sasaki-san. This is Sasaki-san’s sealed reality. But, we do not feel any sensation of being closed at all. Let’s put it this way, it is like the same dish made by different people. The personality and character of the person will affect the taste right?”

She sounded like a housing agent selling this property to me as she said the following.

“I just felt that this place gives a very comfortable feeling. You can feel the air of stability and friendliness right? How do you feel? There and here, which side lets you feel more secure?

“Wait a moment.”

If I have to chose between living in either of them, I would chose none.

“You meant the space created by Sasaki-san? What is the reason? When is it? Why are there no Avatars? Why does this world exist?”

“No reason at all.” She continued with a more relaxed tone. “This world is not a time-limited toy model. It always remains this way, existing ever since it started. Yes, since four years ago. The reason there are no Avatars, is because there is no reason for them to exist, because there is no need to destroy at all.”

No matter how hard I look, I am unable to find a bird flying in the sky. All my ears can pick up are absolute silence.

“This is a very big difference. Sasaki-san did not have any thought of destroying or recreating this world. For Sasaki-san’s consciousness, the outside or inside remains unwavered and is stabilized. This is indeed an ideal state. Even if she is unsatisfied with the reality, she would never attempt to reject the reality but let everything go with the flow.”

The only thing I can hear is the voice of this teenage girl.

“I will ask you again. Which do you prefer? A god that may accidentally destroy the world, or a god with general knowledge that may not do anything, but does not attempt to destroy it either?”

I suddenly felt like defending Haruhi for a bit. Actually she has plenty of general knowledge. Just that a screw becomes loose once in a while. At the end of all of it, she is still a normal woman. Although I do not know how she was in the past, the current Haruhi already knows how to live within the reality. Although she complicates things sometimes, she would never cause UFOs to rain from the sky.

One thing that can definitely be confirmed is that she will no longer recreate the world.

"You sure are confident of yourself. I feel that the things Suzumiya-san thinks subconsciously are things that nobody knows. Not even Koizumi-kun nor the time traveler."

Tachibana Kyoko clasped both her hands together behind her body and turned around to face me.

"Because even I don't know, and that is why I am feeling uneasy. But there would be no problem if it is Sasaki-san. You would know if you look at this place. There are no elements of instability at all."

The smile she revealed is sprinkled with generous amounts of cuteness.

"And so I believe Sasaki-san is the true holder of the power. The reason for that is as above. For Suzumiya-san to become this way, someone must have made a mistake somewhere to cause this.

The superpower of unknown origin held by Haruhi, bestowing upon Koizumi his esper powers, attracted the attention of outer-spatial origin, according to the words of Asahina-san, considered as the mysterious cause to the major time quake.

If all these things occur on Sasaki as well……? What would happen to the influence of the current SOS Brigade?

Totally unimaginable.

In order to chase away this unthinkable thought, I shook my head about.

"So," I finally regained my voice. "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to transplant the powers from Haruhi to Sasaki? How is that possible?"

Tachibana Kyoko looked at me seriously for a while before breaking into her jovial laugh.

"It is not impossible. As long as you are willing to assist us, we can do it. It would be possible if Sasaki-san and you are agreeable. We only wish for so much. Isn't it simple?"

She made a leap backward.

"Let's return to the café. Our union for today shall end here. And I believe you need some time to reconsider."

Talking about that, what exactly were we doing? We were originally sitting on the chairs at the café, and suddenly came out here, what exactly does Sasaki and the rest see us doing?

Just when I wanted to raise this concern, Tachibana Kyoko is already briskly making her way back where we came from. Thinking about it, a guy and a girl existing in this empty world together is indeed a bit problematic. Although it is not time to mind such stuff, but I do not wish to stay too long either. This place is really too quiet. If there are Avatars around, there would at least be some buzz to speak of and help to divert some attention away. What exactly happened? Why am I actually missing such things? Is my mind alright?

After the teenage girl's body entered past the electronic glass sliding door for a few seconds, I am back in the café as well. Heck, I cannot even smell a hint of coffee anywhere.

"Sit down quickly."

Tachibana Kyoko returned to her original seat: between the trio, and put her hand on the table. I also returned to that seat still with my body temperature.

"Please close your eyes and stretch your hands out."

If I open my eyes, what exactly would I see? I thought about this while putting my hands on hers and closed my eyes, focusing all my attention on my sense of hearing.

Tachibana Kyoko applied some slight pressure on my fingers……

And immediately let go. Right at that instant, my sense of hearing returned. No, it should be that the world is revived.

Johannes Brahms playing in the background, slight pitter-pattering sounds from the rain outside. The rich aroma of the coffee beans, as well as the human flow, gushed into my five senses altogether. I opened my eyes.

Sasaki raised her eyebrows and said.

"Hey, you are back…… There should be nothing wrong with saying this right?"

I took a close look at the surroundings. Fujiwara calmly supported his cheeks with his hands, Kuyoh's sleepy face shows no response, Tachibana Kyoko in the middle of the two of them is moistening her throat with the ice water. I then raised my previous query to Sasaki.

"What was I doing just now?"

"Nothing much." Sasaki turned her wrists over and took a look at the watch. "You two only closed your eyes for ten seconds, Tachibana-san and your hand constantly grasping each others' the entire time."

She used that hand to touch her lips.

“So, what did you see? That supposed subconscious world of mine?”

“Hm.”

Although not very willing, I still nodded for confirmation. If it isn’t a hallucination, it could be considered a look. But in the ten seconds through Sasaki’s eyes, both Tachibana Kyoko and I did not disappear. This is a point which I cannot understand.”

“Any thoughts about it?”

“Not really.”

“I thought so too.”

Sasaki laughed jovially.

“How embarrassing. It felt as if you peeped at my inner thoughts.”

“Sasaki-san”, Tachibana Kyoko put down her glass cup. “No matter how I think about it, I still think you are the most suitable. Can you look at this more positively?”

“Hmm, how shall I put it……”

Sasaki looked at me with her head slightly inclined.

“Kyon, what do you think? That so-called mysterious superpower. Is it something that would be no problem even if I had it?”

It is not something that can be determined to be good or bad, and why must you ask me?

If we speak by intuition, even if Sasaki had that incredible yet strange superpower, it is unlikely that she would activate her powers just because of the unhappiness with the score in baseball, and not turn events in the movie into reality, not making August repeat endlessly, as well as not suddenly digging out a cultural artifact right? At the same time, she wouldn’t wear a bunny girl costume and replace an injured senior and perform on stage nor argue with the student council president.

No, those things do not really matter. The root of this issue is that it is not only Sasaki that is involved here.

I cast a glance of nonchalantness to the other side of the table.

Time traveler Fujiwara and the other two.

You want me to cooperate with them? There should be a limit to cracking jokes. That time traveler who laughed at Asahina-san's name and that Asahina-san kidnapper. The other one is the person involved in the Snow Mountain incident, eventually leading to the collapse of Nagato.

Things like this still have to be considered?

Although I still want to remain good friends with Sasaki, if I were to work with this gang, not only will my body and soul not get tranquility, it might even move very far away from zero, right into the negatives.

In order to express such a thought clearly, I took in a deep breath.

"Sorry to keep everyone waiting."

Just when I wanted to open my mouth, the waitress came towards our table with four cups in a tray.

Thus I paused for a while and fell into silence together with the rest.

This happens during normal conversations, much less during talk about things like this. Things like this had better not be heard by people uninvolved.

As silence enveloped everyone, the clanking of the cups and the plates are especially pronounced. The first cup of hot coffee appeared in front of Sasaki, then me, Tachibana Kyoko and finally Kuyoh……

"Grab." (!) Unfolding in front of our eyes is a shocking scene.

Kuyoh, who had never moved since the start, actually reached out to touch the wrists of the female waitress.

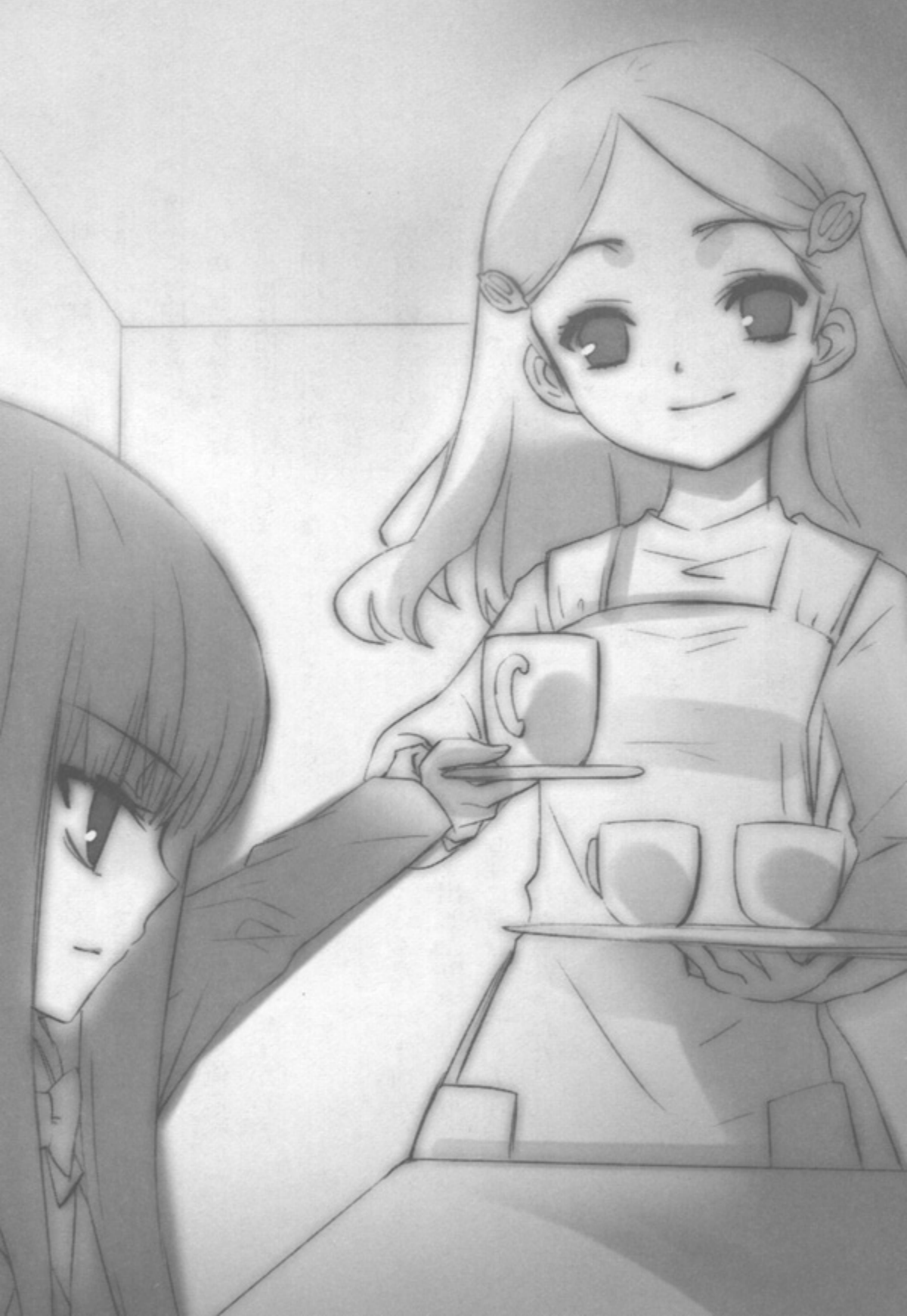
I did not notice what time she moved her hand. In fact I could not even feel her moving. But Kuyoh is tightly holding onto the wrists of the female waitress, and what's more the hand carrying the tray with the cup of coffee to be placed on the table still on it.

She fixed her gaze at the front without any change in expression, not moving other than the one hand.

"……Ah?"

I opened my mouth wide like an idiot.

What is even more shocking is the cup in the tray the waitress is holding onto should have spilled some coffee, but there is not even a drip of it spilled out. From the sound produced just now, the impact should have been pretty strong.



Why……

I immediately understood.

“How may I help you?”

The waitress revealed a gentle smile, not showing any sign of disgruntledness or uneasiness. From the eyes of others, this is a very normal smile. But what I saw behind that façade was a sense of coldness similar to that of an icicle. This is not without reason. For that person’s face is very familiar to me.

“Emiri-senpai……”

I produced a sound that sounded more like a groan.

“…… What are you doing here?”

“Hello.”

With an apron covering the front of her chest, Emiri Kimidori-san is just like occasionally meeting one of the juniors in high school. And that is like the situation now: greeting each other nonchalantly. That tone that lacked sluggishness, it is unbelievable that an alien of unknown origin is currently holding onto the wrist of a living humanoid interface. Although I do not wish to use real life experience to confirm the strength of the grip of Kuyoh, it appears that it seemed much stronger than normal strength, and Kuyoh did not seem to bother about Tachibana Kyoko and Sasaki, who are staring in disbelief, and achieved a feat only non-humans can achieve: to not move any part of the body, including the girls’ school uniform, other than her hands.

“I am really sorry, miss.”

Emiri-senpai said to Kuyoh, who had already turned into an inanimate object that does not make any sound.

“Can you please let go of me? If you don’t, I am not able to serve your order.”

“_____”

Her eyes looked like those of goldfish, not even blinking at all and to put it crudely, not even looking anywhere in particular.

“Miss”, Emiri-senpai’s voice sounded like a shepherd somehow, “I beg of you, you should understand what I am saying right……”

I seemed to have heard the two of them producing sounds of charcoal burning in the boiler. Am I the only one who heard that?

“_____”

Kuyoh slowly loosened her grip. From the pinky finger to the thumb, just like worms slowly leaving Emiri-senpai’s wrist one by one, and moving even more slowly back to the knees.

“Thank you.” While holding onto the cup of coffee, Emiri-senpai bowed politely, before putting the cup in front of Kuyoh. Seeing Kuyoh resuming her doll-like state, I finally let out a huge sigh of relief while asking.

“What are you doing here, Emiri-senpai?”

“I am working part-time.”

I knew that just by looking. If you are not working here you would obviously not be wearing an apron and bringing the coffee over. I wanted to know why you are working here suddenly as this question captivates more of my interest than the location of where the Tsar hid his gold.

But Emiri-senpai nonchalantly left a subpoena on the table while speaking to me in a soft tone.

“Please keep this a secret from the president. Because the student council’s rules state that working part-time is prohibited.”

And it is okay for Nagato? No, compared to that……

“Please enjoy your meal.”

Both of our responses still remain unsynchronized. Emiri-senpai left with the tray very quickly. Looking at how skilled she is at the job, it seems as if she had been working here since three years ago. Had she always been the one bringing us our cold drinks and taking our orders? The reason for not noticing till now could be because one person becomes insignificant in such a large crowd kind of theory, or some influence coming from space…… if there really is one. I think it should be the latter. If Kuyoh can do it, I am afraid Emiri-senpai can do it too.

“Who is she?”

Regarding Sasaki’s question……

“A… senior from my school.”

I can only answer this way. Just when I am comparing Kuyoh’s apparently extremely eye-catching and yet attracted nobody’s attention’s looks to Emiri-senpai, who is skillfully pouring tea for newly-arrived customers……

“Hehe.”

Someone let out a strange laughter, seemingly from being unable to hold it back any longer. That is Fujiwara. He curled his full-of-sarcasm lips.

“Hahaha, I had indeed seen something interesting. This is what I call a farce among the farce. Wahaha, isn’t this something that could only be seen once in a lifetime? What an interesting farce. Haha.”

I am really tempted to just pour the coffee on his face, but this time traveler seemed really amused. If he is not in front of me I think he would probably hug his stomach laughing. In fact, his body has started quivering from all that laughing.

Tachibana Kyoko with her face filled with astonishment slowly changed it to that of giving up, as if being unable to keep up with the speed of development of things and shrugged her shoulders. Sasaki and I checked each other’s responses, wordlessly inquiring what exactly Fujiwara’s response meant. But since there is no answer in the first place, it is naturally impossible to have an answer to that. Kuyoh’s ashen white face is being covered by the rising fumes from the cup.

Due to the sudden addition of the part-timer Emiri-senpai, the trio other than Kuyoh and Fujiwara (including me) are totally astonished. Just as I was getting bored facing this time traveler who produced disgusting laughing sounds while recalling the matter and the alien lifeform who totally ignored the steaming coffee in front of her, remaining static without moving an inch like a broken ore radio(!)……

“_____”

Kuyoh suddenly stood up without any warning, moving without a sound and in regular steps at a standard unrivaled by even the most skilful ninja towards the automatic sliding glass door. It is indeed an industrialized tool, although the people around cannot detect her, the sensory mechanism in the machinery managed to and the door immediately opened with a zoom sound. Kuyoh did not forget to bring her umbrella she bought from the convenience store back with her, and she finally disappeared to somewhere unknown. Maybe she sensed the anger among the few of us. But, what exactly is this fellow here for?

“Me too……”

Tachibana Kyoko revealed a smile that is strong-willed despite appearing tired.

“I am really a little tired today, so I shall go now. I actually wanted to talk more. Sasaki-san, I may have to trouble you next time. Ah, I will settle the bill here. It is alright. I would like to really thank you all today.”

She stood up and walked towards the counter and told the staff something about “Please issue me a receipt, just round up the numbers” or something like that and paid before waving to us and finally opened the umbrella and carried it home in the drizzle.

I am also very unhappy after being taken as a joke by the time traveler and thus decided to leave. I still want to return to my bedroom for my nap together with Shamisen.

“Goodbye, Sasaki.”

“Hm.” Sasaki calmly raised her head to look at me and said, “I think I will be contacting you soon, I also know that this caused you trouble. But Kyon, I really do not want this matter to drag on for too long. Plus the next national mock examinations are coming up soon, it is better to clear these things quickly.”

“Fully agreed.”

I agreed with this opinion from the bottom of my heart. Lucky it is you, the same Sasaki I know from middle school.

Fujiwara also somehow managed to resume wearing his uncaring expression while listening to our conversation, but did not comment in the end nor do anything that would make me uncomfortable. Although I am a bit mindful of the sudden appearance of Emiri-senpai that seemed more to astonish me, but once I think that she probably came here to observe Kuyoh, it becomes understandable. If the person facing Kuyoh is Nagato I am afraid she would not be able to control herself as well, and that Asakura Ryoko did not come back to life, is really wonderful. After all, something like having a small knife piercing my body, even in my topsy-turvy life, is one of those experiences that I would reject totally.

Because I left the café just like this, I have no idea what Sasaki and Fujiwara talked about.

I do not wish to know either, that was how it was at that time.

Chapter 3

α-5

Monday. Morning.

Thanks to the fact that they spent Sunday in complete leisure, my legs were feeling light today.

As the days began to approach the middle of the fourth month, I, who would no longer go to the first year school building by accident but quickly adjusted to my new seat in the class of 2-5, turned around and spoke to the black-haired head in front of me.

"What's wrong? Defeated a month early by May sickness?"

Haruhi, who had arrived at school before I did, sighed and languidly attached herself to her desk while looking fatigued.

"No…"

Haruhi simultaneously raised her head and let out an "Unh", which grew up to a yawn.

"Just a little lack of sleep. I've been going to bed late. I was busy with a lot of stuff yesterday, you know."

Speaking of which, just what were you doing? Listening to the radio late at night or something?

"Why must I reveal my private life to you?"

Pouting her lips like a crocodile, "Teaching that kid from my neighborhood, cleaning the clubroom, doing weekly remodeling, that's already 'a lot of stuff.' Although I do listen to the radio every once in awhile. Also, I had to gather materials."

While recalling the Bespectacled Professor, I asked,

"Materials? What materials?"

"Argh, you're really like a kid aren't you. Really, you should be able to ask more than "what materials" at this stage. I wonder why it is that no matter how much time passes, guys never age mentally? Childlike intellectual curiosity is innocent and charming, but if you've got a face like you're conducting an investigation, it makes me to not want to tell you. You're old enough already, use your own head to figure out what I do."

Is the reason that the more I think about the things you do, the more it seems like you have no place in school, the result of my own misunderstandings?

“Kyon, you listening? It’s been a year since you’ve become a Brigade member. Develop an ability to read your Brigade leader’s inclinations and intents, and then act on them ahead of time. With the way things are currently you’ll always remain the lame brigade member. Because on my inner list, you’re dashing straight to the very bottom.”

Laughing with her intrepid smile, Haruhi opened the notebook I use in first period’s Japanese class, and with a method I can only see as waving her pen around, stupidly drew some lines on it.

“If you put it into a graph it’d look kind of like this.”

On the longest line was Koizumi, and the lines which were footnoted “Mikuru” and “Yuki” were about the same length. If you’re wondering about me, mine was about a 5mm line that wasn’t raised anywhere near the other meritorious brigade members. This really doesn’t make me sad, though.

“Then the Computer Research Society’s president’s about this long, and Tsuruya is, hmm, already here. Look. You, you’re even losing to outsiders! That flyer from before wasn’t satisfactory at all, you know.”

You’re probably thinking something like, “That’s pathetic considering you’re the most senior brigade member.” As to that, the Computer Research Society’s president’s a generous guy who’s donated a grand total of five computers to us and the height of Tsuruya’s social status couldn’t be placed even after the passing of a Chinese calendar sexagenary cycle. I’ll give my sympathy vote to the Computer Research Society’s president, so go ahead and raise his line a little more. This is trite.

Haruhi, her expression turned to that of a booing hometeam supporter irritated at the opposing team’s stalling, said,

“Stupid! Be more spirited! There’s about one month until the SOS Brigade’s one-year anniversary. At that time, we’ll be rapidly handing out many applications. If some first year brigade applicants come, are you planning on somehow playing out your upperclassman status? ‘Cause for your information, I will not be using the seniority system!”

So are you planning on using Nobunaga’s system? If it were the Warring States period, in a battle you should capture and imprison the enemy military commander, but at this school something like the student council’s opposing influence should be more than enough to treat the cancerous SOS Brigade. Koizumi is the pillar backing up the student council president, and Tsuruya’s family, although she appears not to know, backs the Organization. If one of the president’s scandalous affairs were to be exposed, he probably has a retinue of foot soldiers to cover it up for him. Although he probably wouldn’t want that.

It seemed that Haruhi wanted to continue her sermon mode, but that was that, since both the bell chimed and Okabe-sensei entered the room, thus suspending her plans.

But is that Haruhi still planning on gathering new members? And putting aside her goal, how is she even going to achieve it?

But even if I worry about it there's nothing that can be done. As for myself, there's Sasaki and Tachibana Kyoko, whom I met on Saturday. I'm anxious about that Kuyoh-something alien, and the time traveler who wasn't there that day but will probably be reappearing soon. It is indeed a pending problem, but I'll admit that if he doesn't come to start a fight, deep down I'm fine with laying it aside.

As for the "if you've got it, bring it on" spirit, I'm fostering that feeling as if it were the larva of a stag beetle becoming a chrysalis. He can lay whatever traps he likes. But I'm going to make him pay a high price when it comes to reparations. Even in boxing, the might of a counter is greater than that of a simple straight. That's the way it always turns out in the boxing manga I was reading. And Haruhi is someone who repays all of her debts and grudges two hundred million-fold indiscriminately.

No, there's no point in meaninglessly wasting words.

There's just one brief thing that I'd like to say…

If you make yourself an enemy of the SOS Brigade, do not think you will live easy.

At lunch break, after giving Taniguchi and Kunikida a few words of non participation, I put down my lunch box and headed for the Literature Club room.

Even if you look around the school, you won't find a place that has a heavier atmosphere at this current moment, and Nagato Yuki was keeping to her totally predictable movement patterns.

"Mind if I come in?"

Nagato, sitting in her chair reading a Western occult book, didn't raise her head.

"……"

"Let me eat here. The classroom is just too noisy. I figured it's good to eat somewhere a little more calm every so often."

"Hmm."

Nagato raised her head in the manner of a self-rightening doll in a slow-motion film, her sweeping eyes floating over me and then returning to reading.

"Have you already eaten?"

"……"

With a nod, Nagato's slender neck inclined forward slightly.

Her response seemed pretty questionable, but figuring out Nagato is not something for lunchtime.

"About the alien called 'Kuyoh'……"

Sitting down in the chair and wrapping my lunch box in a wrapping napkin, I said,

"She serves as the hand of the faction that orchestrated the attempt to freeze us to death in winter, right?

Nagato, using her hand as a replacement for a bookmark and returned her eyes to me, replied,

"Yes."

"What was it you said before… um… she's a humanoid whatever that gives off the same aura you do."

"Perhaps."

"Could she have come for -that-, observing Haruhi or something?"

After taking the time required for a star to blink,

"I don't know."

Something like, your mutual cognizance is incomplete, right?

"Yes. That she is interested in Suzumiya Haruhi's data alteration capabilities is unquestionable. It's one of the reasons for her dispatchment to this planet."

Nagato said this in a businesslike manner.

"They, the Sky Canopy Dominion—"

A word I couldn't ignore entered my ears, so I stopped her.

"Sky Cano… what?"

"Sky Canopy Dominion."

Nagato, who pronounced this quietly, said,

“That is the Integrated Data Sentient Entity provisionally chosen name for them. It is great progress. Until now, we have not even had the concept of attaching names.”

While holding my chopsticks, I thought of the meaning of the name “Nagato Yuki,” and she said,

“From our point of view, it’s derived from beyond the zenith direction.”

She added in a flat voice.

“And the ‘zenith direction’ is,” I said, pointed my chopsticks at the ceiling, “Over there?”

“…”

Allowing the time for the mental multiplication of seven squared to pass, Nagato replied,

“Over there.”

She pointed towards the mountain range outside of the clubroom’s window. Although I understand the fact that it’s north, it’s an existence that cannot be seen no matter your methods, even by radio telescope. It wouldn’t really matter which direction it came from. Bothering oneself with a location’s compass direction is the job of a diviner. And more than that,

“Nagato. Are those bastards planning on doing something like throwing us into another dimension similar to the one in the last disaster they forced on us?”

“I am currently unable to see any such indication.”

Nagato, who had raised her arm behind herself diagonally, returned her hand to the work of holding her page and said,

“A humanoid interface capable of conducting linguistic contact with us has showed us her form. I predict that for her, hereafter some physical contact will become necessary.”

“That girl…”

This reduces the peculiarities about the girl called Suoh Kuyoh by half. There’s a lot of things I’d like to accuse the Integrated Data Sentient Entity of, but I will acknowledge just that they have a good sense in interface making. If you compare Kuyoh to Nagato, Kimidori-san, and let’s even throw in Asakura Ryoko, the latter are greatly preferable.

Nagato said without emotion,

“I will defend against the basic attacks from the individual known as Suoh Kuyoh. I cannot allow any additional dangers towards you and Suzumiya Haruhi.”

Your words are more reliable than any of anyone else's. However, Nagato……

Nagato replied before I could open my mouth.

"Or towards Asahina Mikuru or Koizumi Itsuki."

And you as well, Nagato.

"……"

Towards Nagato's fixated eyes, I answered by putting in my own judgment.

You may not take yourself into consideration, but I am different, and so is Haruhi. You can blow aside Kuyoh and the Sky Canopy Dominion, but having no concern for yourself is behavior I absolutely will not allow. Being protected all the time isn't interesting. The things I can do might be as insignificant as common space dust, but there should still be something I am able to do.

"……"

Nagato lowered her eyes back to the pages of her book, and I, who had taken my opportunity to speak, started on my lunch. There's no comparison between these days and the first day she invited me to her 708 apartment room. To think that this silence, uninterrupted by any words, could give rise to such a sense of comfort……

All of the afternoon classes had finished, and after homeroom's completion and the signal for the class-ending ritual had been given, form teacher Okabe-sensei descended from the podium and my classmates noisily began to rise from their seats. Students who did not have cleaning today had no more business in class, so I picked up my bag, stood up, and found that my bag, which shouldn't really have anything in it, rapidly became heavy.

Upon turning around, I found that Haruhi had extended her hand and grabbed onto my case. Her hand is quite powerful.

"Wait a second."

Haruhi, who had been sitting, continued while glaring somewhere around my ear,

"Do you remember that we have a math quiz tomorrow?"

"Ah… sort of."

Now that she mentions it, I seem to remember last week our maths instructor made an announcement, but I have a great deficiency in keeping such trifling matters in memory. "So you forgot about it after all. Figured."

Haruhi said haughtily with a sigh,

“Because you’re like that, you’ve caused the SOS brigade’s members’ bell curve to drop all by yourself. Since it’s a general test, even you should be able to get some points, so at least do that much.”

Are you my mother? More importantly, you should move from your seat. You’re interfering with people’s cleanup duties.

“How can you be so unconcerned? You, bring your math textbook and come here.”

Haruhi stood up with great speed and dragged me up to the teacher’s desk. The many people on cleanup duty are accustomed to this, and didn’t even look at Haruhi and me. Although the fact that their faces were growing weird smiles irritated me.

Haruhi, who had wrested away my textbook, casually spread it open on top of the teacher’s desk and said,

“This number 2 example problem on page 9 will definitely show up on the test so make sure to memorize it. Along with this formula. This is a model question, so knowing Yoshizaki, it’ll definitely be put in. What about the blackboard? Show me your notes.”

In the face of her rapidly-firing demands, all I could do was helplessly obey.

“What’s this? There’s not anything written here besides what was partway through the lecture! You were sleeping after lunch, weren’t you?”

So what, it doesn’t matter. Weren’t you sleeping today in Classical Literature too?

“If you judge it’s safe to sleep, that’s fine. It’s about whether or not you understand even if you don’t listen. But you don’t understand, right? Get it? You’re being especially wrecked by the maths and sciences, so you need to at least put in some effort.”

Haruhi underlined some problems in my textbook with my pen and said,

These are the minimum problems you must get done, so you need to memorize them. And you can’t just memorize the answer because he’ll switch around the numbers in the test. For starters, this one, this one, and…”

In this manner, it turned out that I stood there and took Haruhi’s special lecture with the teacher’s podium between us. The people with cleaning duty who understood the situation fortunately ignored us, and we did them the same favor. This is somehow embarrassing. I’d be glad if you’d at least do this in the club room.

“Idiot. The club room is a place for doing club activities, not a place for studying. It’s a real killjoy to be doing something interesting in a place that isn’t.”

Looking bored, Haruhi pointed out problems that she imagined would appear on the test, mentioned a complicated method of solving a problem, and didn't release the teacher's podium and me until I'd finally gotten all of the questions she pointed out correct.

"Well, this should do it."

Haruhi rolled up the pen and closed my textbook. If this were to continue for another 5 minutes, my brain would give voices of rejection related to overtime work. Our classmates, who had finished their cleaning, had all removed themselves.

"With this, if you're below average on tomorrow's test there's no cure for you. You'll need surgery. If you can, keep all this in your memory until the midterm."

I really can't give any guarantees. I can't be concerned with things as far ahead in the future as that. I stuffed my poor textbook, which had been crammed full of writing, into my bag and looked down on Haruhi's authoritative eyes, which appeared to be challenging me. I was thinking that I should say something, but no words came out, and I moved my neck up and down as if trying to deceive her.

"Anyways, with this you should be able to pass tomorrow's test easily. If you aren't able to figure out at least half of them, I'm going to reprimand you in the capacity of the Brigade leader. If things turn out like that, won't it be my responsibility to make you an arithmetic drill? Please put effort into this."

After briskly walking to her desk and picking up her case, Haruhi said,

"Don't lag behind, let's hurry up and go. Mikuru and the others are going to get tired of waiting."

Although it's doubtful that anything exists which can rival those three in the ability to patiently wait for someone, that was my intention to begin with. While chasing the fast-walking Haruhi's hair, which was waving on the top of her shoulders, I began shedding some inner light on my honest side, and found that I hadn't really driven away tomorrow's quiz into the depths of forgetfulness. I just figured that in the break period before maths class or some other time, I could ask Kunikida for instruction.

And today, with Haruhi having switched places with my personal Father Time, hmm, how should I put it, today has been classified as another one of those days where I don't care what happens.

In following Haruhi, who exited first into the hallway, I took ten-odd large strides.

The stride of Haruhi, who was walking at a seemingly wind-cutting speed, was as pointlessly authoritative as always, exactly like Shamisen would if he'd heard the sound of a canned cat food lid being opened, and in order to synchronize with that pace, which should belong to someone half her height, I had to command my leg muscles to move at full capacity. Thanks to

all this, we were before the club room in a flash, and Haruhi opened the door without knocking, finally coming to a stop once she set a foot in the room.

“Ah, Suzumiya, Kyon.”

Asahina, who ran up to us with a pitter-patter, was not in her maid outfit but a normal sailor uniform for some reason.

The girl from the future wore a troubled face, and with a fleeting and anxious voice said,

“I’ve been waiting for you. I was just about to go out to call you. Ah, them, it wasn’t me that was waiting, it was them.”

So that Haruhi wouldn’t have to move, I raised my neck and inspected the room from above the shoulder of her sailor uniform.

“Geh!”

Without thinking, I blurted this with a strange voice.

Nagato was reading a book in the corner of the room, Koizumi was sitting on a table chair, the smile coming out on his face being curtailed for everyday life, and then there was one thing happening which was unpredictable.

Asahina turned back towards the inside of the club room,

“Everyone, thanks for waiting. We don’t have enough teacups and so I couldn’t prepare tea, um, I did try preparing them one by one about 30 minutes ago… I didn’t really know what to do…”

I understand your distressed expression.

The clubroom is totally overloaded.

There wasn’t even a need to check the color of their indoor shoes. I’m sure that one year ago, we all floated about with that same atmosphere. How should I put it, they’re “fresh,” although that expression may be a little too plain.

The new first-year guys and girls crowded the inside of the Literature Club clubroom.

My estimate would be about 10 people.

They all directed their gaze at Haruhi and me, and for some reason made strange smiles.

“… Could it be that you’re brigade applicants?”

And what preceded the replies of Asahina and Koizumi was,

“Yes!”

The chorus voice of the ten guys and girls.

Hearing their youthful chorus, which was nurtured by a desire of unknown foundation, my mouth, unharmonized with anyone, came out with its catchphrase.

“Oh boy…”

ß-5

Monday. Morning.

Because that "stuff" happened yesterday, my inner feelings were complicated though that didn't mean that I let my face slip into a complicated expression. The problem was Haruhi, who was proud of her own skills of intuition that are sharp like a utility knife. After distorting my ill-intentioned thoughts, she could probably turn them 360 degrees and arrive at the right answer.

At best, I need to keep wearing this mask that I've conjured up.

For better or for worse, Haruhi, who had arrived at school before I did, sighed and attached herself to her desk while looking somehow fatigued.

It's not possible that she's been tired out by the weekday obligation of commuting to school, it's probably something more like a lack of sleep due to watching late-night movies.

Well, this is certainly convenient. I would wholeheartedly like to take a moment of tranquility from the energy-drained Brigade leader, and so I arrived at my desk as quietly as possible and quietly placed my case nearby the desk.

As I listened to what seemed to be the sound of Haruhi's hair and clothing rustling as she slightly raised her head at my back, I continued staring at the blackboard which was not dirtied by chalk.

The bell rang, and I continued staring patiently until Okabe-sensei came to harmonize the classroom.

If it's sleep shortage we're talking about, actually I was experiencing the same thing. Yesterday, thanks to being forcefully transplanted into an unrealistic place, my head-clearing had been hard to get.

It's also caused partially by my worrying that the phone might start ringing in the middle of the night.

It's probably because of that.

In the middle of second period's class, Classical Literature, I'd already begun to drift away on my boat. This need to sleep, which is nigh inescapable, is thought to be promoted by the spring sun whose light illuminates the classroom. At my back, Haruhi had long ago started breathing in a sleeping pattern, and there's no way it'd be a problem if the Sleep-Study Clinicians rose just one more man in number…

……It's no good. It's seriously as if from something like Sleep Hell, the strongest of the demons has barged in……

I fell into the hand of the demon of short-term sleep, and I had a dream that was among the worst of possibilities.

A vicarious experience of an event which actually happened…

…… Memories of a day in my third year…… in middle school……

In the boundless tedium of everyday life which I was powerless to fix in those ten-odd years, there were times when I'd be surprised at finding myself thinking about something disturbing.

For example, such things as "won't a missile which the military misfired come and hit us, won't a falling man-made satellite which is still burning make a direct hit somewhere in Japan, won't a gigantic meteor fall and plunge the world into unprecedented chaos," not because I desired a catastrophe which would allow me to feel despair in my daily existence, but just because I happened to think about them.

And when I'd talk to my classmate friend Sasaki about this,

"Kyon, that's a syndrome of modern entertainment. You've been reading manga or novels too much."

She would explain this to me with her usual courteous smile floating on her face.

That was a word I'd never heard before.

As a matter of course, I asked her.

What on Earth is that?

"It's understandable that you wouldn't have heard it before. About the word I just used,"

After that short preface, she continued,

"Reality is not constructed in the same manner as movies or dramas, novels or manga. That's a disappointment to you, isn't it? The protagonists in the entertainment world, one day, suddenly, will find themselves faced with an unrealistic phenomenon, sense trouble, and will find themselves placed in a situation which could hardly be called pleasant. In the majority of cases, those stories' protagonists will, using intellect, bravery, a hidden power, or through developing an unspecified talent, overturn their broken-down circumstances. However, those are stories which can undoubtedly only occur in the fictional world. And it's because they are fiction that they are consequently realized in the entertainment world. If we were to posit that a world like in movies, dramas, novels, and manga was made to be ubiquitously visible in everyday life, then those forms of entertainment would not longer be entertainment, they would be documentaries."

It was a theory I seemed to understand and not understand at the same time, so I truthfully told her so.

Sasaki produced a chortling laugh from the inside of her throat.

“To put it in other terms, something like reality is supported by hard laws, see. No matter how long you wait, aliens will not come to attack Earth, and an ancient evil god will not be reborn from the seas.”

How would you know something like that?

Are you trying to say that there are things which absolutely cannot happen in this world?

Even if it’s a small, the probability that a giant meteor could hit Earth shouldn’t be zero.

“Did you say ‘probability?’ Listen, Kyon. If we’re talking about probability, it’s definitely true that nothing becomes impossible. For example,”

Sasaki said while pointing at the classroom wall,

“If you charged at that wall with all your effort, the probability of you passing through and appearing in the adjacent room is not zero. But see, you’d probably say that there’s no way you could pass through a wall. However, that’s untrue. In the quantum world, in spite of the presence of an electron insulator which should absolutely prevent the passage of electrons, it happens often that at some point the electrons pass through the very object and appear in another location. It’s called the tunneling effect. If we consider things using that as a basis, if the chemical elements that compose your body were to be broken down, since there would be nothing but particles which are the same as electrons left, it’s not impossible that you could pass straight through the wall without making a hole in the same manner. But the probability is about such that if you were to charge the wall once every second, even if you did this for 15 billion years, it would never happen. That is to say, wouldn’t be fine if we called it ‘impossible?’”

What the hell are we talking about just now?

When listening to Sasaki’s speeches, it usually happened that my own thoughts would gradually become obscure, I would get the feeling that I had been deceived, and the conversation would end.

A gentle smile would open on Sasaki’s noble features, and she looked at me from across.

“And moreover, Kyon. If you were to be thrown into a dimension in which the world of those unrealistic stories existed, the question of whether you would be able to act as conveniently as the protagonists who appear in fiction do can only be called exceedingly dubious. If you ask why they can so freely wield intellect, bravery, hidden power, and special abilities to topple adversity, that would be because it was written that way. So, where is the author of your story?”

I don’t remember making any kind of response.

The above is a conversation between Sasaki and I which occurred on a day in June two years ago, in our classroom when we were in the third year of middle school. My first meeting with Sasaki was when she became my classmate in the beginning of Spring, but as we strangely got along well in conversation, our relationship came to be one in which we simply talked about whatever pleased us.

Sasaki was, as far as I know, the only student who had completely read the Ellery Queen series.

By the way, I haven’t read them myself.

For every type of topic Sasaki would know an amusing outline to give.

Fate had it that Sasaki was even in the same courses as I was in the cram school I was forcibly made to go to, and if I were to say that our intimacy was on a level that, say, at lunch break we’d eat school lunch together, you’d probably get the big picture. I’m essentially the type of human that likes reading things like manga magazines alone during meals, but if it is with this person, I can use my utensils in comfort.

However, we didn’t have a single point of contact outside of school or cram school. If I was asked if I considered her a close friend, I think my answer would probably be “no.”

Sasaki puts her elbow on my desk such that she is leaned over. Her two black eyes that sparkle nicely with twinkle, among her other well-arranged features, stood out especially. If she were to get rid of her roundabout and questionable terms, she would certainly be attractive, I think.

As a test, I tried saying something exactly as I had thought of it.

“That’s an interesting thing to say!”

She made a face as if she had just swallowed down a roar of laughter.

“I’ve never understood the reasoning behind making the question of whether one is attractive or unattractive an issue in this life. I think that I want to be rational and logical, no matter the time, place, or situation. In accepting reality as it is, emotional and sentimental thought processes can be nothing but obstructive noise. I can’t think of emotion as anything other than a crude shelter which impedes human evolution’s progress towards autonomy. Especially feelings of love, it’s like a kind of mental illness!”

Is that so?

“A long time ago, there was a person who said so. It was a very thought provoking statement, so I still remember it. You probably want to say crazy things like, ‘well if love didn’t exist, marriage couldn’t happen and kids couldn’t be made!’”

I stayed silent.

Well then, what do I want to say?

“Just look at wild animals. There are definitely kinds among the rest that seem to love their children, protect them, and raise them. But that doesn’t come from love.”

Sasaki only moved the bridge of her lips.

It was a smile with the pretense of being evil.

It seemed like she wanted me to ask her a question, so I did so.

“Well then, what does it come from?”

Sasaki said thus:

“Instinct,” and from here she made me listen to a one-sided exposition on whether love and emotion were different things, whether they were united, or whether if they were united could they be separated, and when at some point she shifted to a rhetorical analysis on the problem of the difference between whether or not human nature was good or evil, the shadow of a third party fell upon my desk.

It was Okamoto, a person in the same section as us who had come bringing worksheets about our future plans…

…

…

The bell rang lightly, the hearing of which was the end of my refrain.

I woke up just when I was able to recall the facial features of Okamoto. I immediately confirmed my current coordinates. This is the classroom of 2-5 in North High. The break time has unconsciously arrived. Haruhi appeared to still be in dreamland. Her soft, rhythmic breathing ringing near my ears.

Two persons sleeping without getting called up, how rare, in fact nearly a miracle. If it is because we had already been blacklisted by the clear-headed teacher as being hopeless cases…… Hmm…… Haruhi may feel happy, but for someone like me, whose academic results are not exactly desirable, this is not something to be relaxed about.

After all I came here with the goal of graduating, at least that is what my parents planned.

Because I stacked my textbooks to be used as a pillow just now, I rubbed my face with my hand, checking if there are any marks left on my face. In this period of time, whatever I had dreamed

of just now seemed to have been totally erased from my memory. Huh? Why do I keep feeling I had missed a very important phrase? Although I remember Sasaki appearing, I am unable to recall what exactly is in the conversation.

I flicked on my temples with my finger, it hurt.

This is the reality. Whatever happened just now was a dream. While it is easy to say that "This is something to be expected", but I have to confirm whether the world I am existing in now is the real one occasionally, waking up the negatively stubborn subconscious of mine that kept drifting into past memories.

Sasaki, Kuyoh and Tachibana Kyoko, although considered real enough, but the side I am standing on is not there, but here. Here being the one of our Brigade leader dozing off behind me now.

This is a fact to never be, or ever be forgotten.

If this reality is ever facing destruction, I would change it back to this old self no matter what. This is what I am determined to do.

Not because I did it because someone told me to, nor was it for anyone, after all I do not wish to be among the ranks of the superheroes or humanitarians, who are of a totally different moral standing than myself. In fact, this is totally for myself.

I had made this decision long ago, right during Christmas last year.

During lunch break, Haruhi disappeared from the classroom. I thus joined my tables with Taniguchi and Kunikida, blissfully enjoying my lunch.

The reason for always mixing with these few friends is not because I find adding more names to my friends logbook difficult. To put it simply, it is because these two are friends that I get along pretty well with. I have not thought of bringing myself further away from them even until now. I hope to pursue this matter with the school, who failed to sort the classes properly. It is also because of this that I decided to remain friends with these two still.

"Kyon, there is a question I do not know whether I should ask."

Kunikida asked while looking at me innocently, carefully removing the skin from his chum salmon (1). Hearing how natural he spoke about it, I immediately replied.

"What about it?"

"Did you see Sasaki recently?"

I nearly swallowed the prune I was chewing on together with its skin.

"……Why?"

Did Sudou's middle school gathering network reach Kunikida by now?

"Not long ago, I guess it is about the beginning of April." Kunikida put down his chopsticks. "I participated in the national mock examinations organized by the cram school and met her at the exam hall. But I did not really chat with her, and I don't know whether she noticed me in the first place."

Why did you suddenly remember this? The new school term had started for so long.

"Because the results of the examinations came out yesterday, you know, those which recorded the rankings. Just when I was looking for my name, I discovered hers first. She was indeed in her own form. Her total scores were much higher than mine."

Kunikida started moving his chopsticks again.

"And so I thought, I have to get a better score than her next time. This is just a temporary target anyway, a pseudo-opponent. I think Sasaki-san's rankings would not adjust too much, so as long as I get a rank higher than hers, it will be a confirmation of my own abilities. I think Kyon would know which school Sasaki-san aimed to go to, and so I asked."

"No idea."

This conversation must move on as soon as possible, or else……

"Oh, I am unable to take it as I did not just hear anything from just now."

Taniguchi flashed an evil grin.

"You talking about Sasaki? The one Kyon was incredibly intimate with during the middle school days, right?"

You see, this bummer with an incredibly keen sense had already swallowed the bait together with the hook.

I immediately exercised my right to denial, transforming into a loyal disciple of the passiveness sect, concentrating on finishing my lunchbox. Taniguchi is like a cat prancing at its prey, full of curiosity.

"How exactly was she as a person?"

“A very cute girl, and a very clever one at that. You can say that she is strange too if you want to put it that way. Hmm…… I always felt that feeling of strangeness was orchestrated. Yeah, indeed a strange person.”

Sasaki said you were strange too, how matching.

“Really? But the symbolism should be different. Sasaki is conscious of her being strange, but when I am pointed out to be strange, I still feel surprised myself. But she understands herself very well. I feel that she is putting herself into a frame that is built on the basis of her understanding of herself, all the time ensuring that she doesn’t exceed the frame.”

Indeed, from the way she speaks, it does feel so.

“So I wanted to know if she is like this now. After all Sasaki-san attended a private high school with a high promotion rate isn’t it? Most students there should be guys. I am a little worried, for if she keeps restricting herself within that frame, won’t she feel fatigued?”

Facing Kunikida, who was not exactly carrying a look of concern, Taniguchi stuffed a piece of cauliflower into his mouth before continuing.

“This would have exceeded my operating frequency. I’ve had enough of strange women. Suzumiya is like this too. Wait. No, this is totally unrelated to Suzumiya. Tell me, why do I always have no fate with cute girls? But now that I am promoted to second year, perhaps it is better to target the underclassmen. But there are no connections. I must think of a way to solve this problem before the summer break comes along.”

Facing Taniguchi, who started talking like a rapid-firing machine gun for no reason, the most I can offer him is “Just do whatever you want”. Upon remembering that I had just met Sasaki yesterday for a gathering with three other abnormal crows, I lost my appetite. This connection between Kunikida and Sasaki is no doubt a coincidence, but hearing the mention of her name at such a convenient time makes one have the “This may be some kind of premonition” kind of unscientific thoughts. Just like a reminder to “Not forget this point” while I am summarizing a story, it has a very unnatural and otherworldly feel to it.

Is it a warning? Looking at yesterday’s situation, let’s not talk about Sasaki first, Fujiwara and Tachibana Kyoko did not show any signs of threat or pressure. Kuyoh too. Although she always gives off a very strange vibe, we have Nagato, and now even Kimidori-san was sent to the shop. That is why I can relax somewhat and treat the entire issue as if it is no big matter.

Thinking about it clearly, the SOS Brigade would be united no matter what. But, it does not apply to their side. Looking at the state of things, they do not have an esper as strong as Koizumi while having a more self-centered time traveler than Asahina-san (big), as well as an alien that seems to know none of the etiquette on Earth…… the connection between the trio is just so weak. And they wanted to raise Sasaki to the status of god, but Sasaki herself refused to agree.

If they wanted to defeat the unbeatable Haruhi on our side, the cast still seems a bit lacking. They should have found more people. The current state is literally neutral. What exactly are they thinking? If they expected a person of the caliber of Tachibana Kyoko to be able to move me, they have really underestimated me.

Just like the headache you get in the morning from sleeping enough but too much, I endured with the uncomfortable feeling as I continued finishing my lunch box.

Taniguchi's conversation had already turned to the number of first-year girls that are of AAA grade and above, but that had already exceeded my scope of interest. She would not be one of those who would want to enter the SOS Brigade anyway.

After all, Suzumiya Haruhi and the SOS Brigade's heroic deeds had long reached the ears of the neighboring commoners. This is what I heard from Sasaki as well.

After dismissal that day, Haruhi and I stood up right after Obake-sensei stepped off the teachers' podium and left the classroom immediately.

I originally thought that we would be heading to the clubroom as usual, but……

"Kyon, you go ahead. I have some place I have to visit."

Haruhi threw her schoolbag at me, walking at a pace faster than a Frisbee being thrown out and disappeared quickly.

Could it be that she had sharper eyes than Taniguchi and discovered an AAA grade first year before him and is now running off to kidnap that person? Even if it is so, it cannot be helped. We can only follow her wishes. I had long cultivated such an attitude.

Thus, I decided to proceed to the clubroom at a leisurely pace.

Those first years who joined the sports clubs should have begun their practices by now. One can also see the ex-third years in their level shirt. You can even meet them along the walkways, quite a refreshing feeling. Although "refreshing" is such a cliché word to use, but there are no other expressions to describe this situation.

If anyone wants to join the Literature Club, Nagato can also finally display her airs as a senior, that isn't too bad. But again, she is after all an alien humanoid interface that has to read over three hundred Earth books per year. Even if she had juniors, it is difficult to imagine that they feel happy talking to Nagato with her transparent protective layer. But compared to looking for a book you want to read alone, it is still better to have a buddy to exchange books with. One can then exchange their newly-bought books with the other and would be much more convenient. After all I do not have the ability to critique or discuss the contents of the book after finishing it,

so even though I borrowed books from her before, I had never lent her any. I might as well find some day to give her a library card as a gift or something.

The me who had arrived in front of the clubroom would never forget to knock on the door first to confirm that there is nobody inside. This time round, there is no response. I immediately opened the door and found it empty. I am actually the first, how rare.

I threw my schoolbag on the table and sat on the foldable chair. When I felt a sense of boredom, I started wondering why am I feeling this way before suddenly realising.

Oh, it is because the one who is always here no matter what and making one think she stays here permanently, Nagato, is nowhere in sight.

But she could have been late because her cleaning duty delayed her. Or maybe she went to help the Computer Research Society.

While waiting for the other four, I picked up the hardcover book left on the table, seemingly belonging to Nagato, and took a glance at one of the pages. Looks like it is a story about an installation eternally seeking a place it belongs to.

α-6

After remaining frozen for a few seconds, Haruhi immediately issued orders to chase everyone except Asahina-san and Nagato out of the clubroom. The reason is really simple……

"Mikuru, just change first. Of course the waitress one. The cheongsam, I hate to admit, I do not think it suits you. What a waste. Never mind, I will prepare it for you in the future, just bear with it for a while."

"Eh? Change right now?"

Asahina-san gingerly held onto the two shoulders of her sailor uniform, looking at the first year boys and girls walking out of the room obediently.

"Kyaa~"

And she raised her head up like a small parrot. Haruhi immediately pointed her finger at her.

"Mikuru, what are you of the SOS Brigade? I think you should have known it by now. Let me confirm it, tell me who are you again."

"Kyaa~ That, I am……? Eh? What am I……?"

Compared to the unconfident Asahina-san who kept her head raised to face Haruhi, this leader of ours, with confidence exceeding that of the founder of a new religion and is so proud that it is criminal, pointed her finger at the little animal-lookalike third year while continuing in a high pitch.

"The mascot, mascot! Mikuru must have a radically different role. Of course it isn't just limited to this, but the bottom line is still that. If basics like this are not defined it will affect the structures above. So this is how it will go for this impromptu admission exercise. Being a symbol that is easily understood, you have to remain a waitress here. Or else the new members may be confused. First impressions are the most important. Uh huh, I can hire a bodyguard for you. Since Mikuru is gifted with such talents, you should have more confidence and present yourself as a waitress well. Understand?"

Haruhi revealed a scheming grin that is easily understood.

"Do not let them leave later. I will be giving the opening speech on behalf of the SOS Brigade. If anyone dares to attempt escaping, do not feel sorry for them. Just inject general anaesthetic and tie them up."

Saying that, she closed the door.

From the inside of the partition-converted wall, one could hear the sound of shirts rubbing against the skin and various "Kyaa~ Suzumiya-san…… Very itchy…… wahaha……" calls.

Other than listening to these extremely arousing calls that are mixed with tears and laughter, Koizumi and I are unable to find other things to do and could only turn around and stare at the first years standing at the walkway.

They should have used this chance to escape, but these ten odd first years' eyes are shining with curiosity and anticipation, waiting here, following Haruhi's instructions. I counted eleven people, seven males and four females. Looking at how new the shirts with green stripes that they are donning, it proved that they had been high school students for hardly a month.

Should I say something to them first? Just take it as a senior giving them some words of advice or something.

I took a glance at Koizumi. This purely symbolic "Assistant leader" handsome lad, continued giving his usual relaxed smile. From his bright eyes and relaxed expression, it seems none of this people are part of Koizumi's group. That is to say, this is a scene that can be seen at any club activity in any school: applicants taking a tour of the clubroom. However, the SOS Brigade is not an organization that is recognized by the school authorities, and would never engage in any normal club activities. Does this gang of people know that?

"They should have came only after they knew."

Koizumi told me softly by my ear.

"From my scope of knowledge, every teenager here has no other intentions. Very clearly, all of them are genuinely looking forward to being a member of the SOS Brigade. At least there are no espers, aliens or time travelers in this group."

Since you are so sure about it, I guess it must have its proof. Now that Tachibana Kyoko, the time traveler dude and Suou Kuyoh and whatever else has appeared, even if that gang decided to sneak a few of their comrades into North High's SOS Brigade, it is nothing surprising.

"I had already checked the background of all these newcomers."

Koizumi mentioned it calmly.

"It is even more impossible for them to be from Tachibana Kyoko's side. After all the 'Organization' had already been monitoring them closely. Also, if someone with similar fixtures to Kuyoh-san appears, I am sure Nagato-san would not remain passive. If a time traveler snuck in, that would be even better, for we can get hold of that guy and question their intentions. So it is quite a waste that none of those gathered here could possibly be a time traveler."

Koizumi maintained his jovial look and smile, sweeping a glance across the ten odd newcomers.

"No problematic character currently exists, if we were to talk about any remaining problems……"

Going even lower in volume, I guess I am the only one who can hear it now.

"…… it would only be with the students Haruhi accepted as members. For she definitely would not accept everyone as a member, so the problem lies with who will she choose and how would she go about it. It would be great if even one person is left. Although to those first years who really hoped to join us in our fun, them being mere mortals, I guess that is quite pitiful."

If there are anybody who is trying to send themselves to the lion's mouth now, I would of course stop them due to humanitarian reasons. But if it is too late, don't blame me.

I took a glance to my sides, noticing that these nearly-a-dozen first years are really nothing special in terms of physical appearance. The reason for them looking a bit childish is probably because they are still middle school students just last month. There are people trying to hide their laughter, as well as pairs of girls talking and giggling among themselves. Don't know why, I felt that the stares from the girls seemed to be grading Koizumi and myself. Is this my inferiority complex causing a hallucination here?

Just when I am silently staring……

"Okay, sorry to keep everyone waiting!"

"All of you can come in now. Also, Kyon, because there are not enough chairs, go borrow some from other places. There should be some at the Computer Research Society or other clubrooms."

Seems she wanted to order me around like an odd-jobs worker.

"What do you mean? Don't just stand there, go now! The first years on that side, please come in! It is alright! Quick, come in now!"

Haruhi started making some agile and abstract signals.

"I will go help too. If there is a need to carry over ten chairs, I am afraid he cannot finish it in a single trip."

Koizumi moved his back away from the wall he is lying on, I can only helplessly nod at Haruhi while sweeping across the classroom quickly with my eyeballs.

Asahina-san in her waitress costume is standing beside the table, maybe it is due to the sudden change in the ratio of boys and girls in the clubroom, she became really shy and her face turned red like a lady from a wealthy family seeing the world for the first time, huddling her shoulders close together. On the other hand, Nagato did not change her posture at all.

Koizumi and I knocked on the numerous doors all over the clubroom block, finally gathering enough to have a chair for each person. After returning, we saw the first years had lined up in a row like in troop inspections.

Haruhi was at the leader's seat with her chest puffed up, Nagato in her usual permanent spot while Asahina-san, stoned in a corner, unsure of how to proceed. Upon seeing my face, she revealed an expression of some relief. The clubroom that usually has a low population density now holds over three times the usual amount of people, so it felt rather unnatural looking at that. Guess even people other than Asahina-san will feel threatened.

Koizumi and I placed the foldable chairs along the perimeter of the table. Just when I wanted to address the first years for a bit……

"All of you please take a seat."

The Brigade leader snatched away the opportunity to do so.

The ten odd first years slowly settled down after the usual formalities of offering seats to each other. Koizumi moved his chair to the side of the wall and sat on it, carrying an expression of the chief presiding examiner's assistant. Just when I wanted to take a seat as well, I discovered that there are no chairs available for myself.

"Huh?"

The foldable chairs originally available in the clubroom are enough for all members and a visitor. With the additional ten chairs borrowed, there should be just enough for the first year applicants as well as ourselves. Why are there not enough? I did a head count again.

The total number of first years present are…… Twelve? Did I count wrongly? There are eleven when I counted at the walkway just now, seven males and…… five females. I observed intently, but still failed to identify who did I miss out just now. It felt that everyone was here and it would be impossible for me to know who exactly did I leave out anyway. One thing that can be confirmed would be that I have a poor photographic memory.

It can't be helped, I can only stand here. At this moment, Asahina-san started panicking again.

"Ah, ah…… there are not enough tea cups, That…… I still want to make tea…… how……"

While it is not impossible to go steal some Styrofoam cups from the cafeteria, but making tea for those first year applicants, is it reasonable? Just when I wanted to ponder about the question……

"There are some paper cups in the shelves. Just use those."

Haruhi made a conclusion. Asahina-san hurriedly took out the air sealed pack of paper cups, before anxiously continuing.

"Kyaa~! Sorry, there is not enough water, have to get some……"

"Kyon. Water. Use the highest temperature one."

Receiving the edict from Lord Haruhi, I can only force some expression of unhappiness, both hands holding onto the kettle and running off.

When I ran back, panting, the only welcoming factor is the expression of Asahina-san, apologetic yet so cute that it makes one happy at the same time. “Thank you, Kyon.”. This is enough.

Not knowing when it began, the first years that could now be described as “dozen” in quantity kept their attention focused on Asahina-san in her waitress costume, putting the kettle onto the cooker.

Haruhi proudly continued.

“Our brigade has an exceptional courier and waitress, you can look all over the country, but the only club that have cute waitresses making tea for free is us.”

“Ah, Eh, Yes……” Asahina-san shyly replied.

“Oh……” The first years responded.

Are you all idiots? This is not something to be proud about. This is not where curious people should come.

“And” Haruhi acted all high and mighty and said with a bright smile “Mikuru’s tea-brewing skills are forever innovating, the tea in the last meeting tasted somewhat weird, it is really interesting, and I like the name a lot too.”

“Ah hah, That…… Yes, that is my new creation. Very good.” Asahina-san started to lose herself like a loyal dog being praised by its owner.

“Oh……” The first years responded again.

I think you all had better stop “Oh”-ing. This is the time to turn back and run away. Because that whatever tea had a medicinal taste to it. How do I put it…… although it is improved by Asahina-san’s image, it is still something that is really difficult to have a high score. Other than Haruhi who has a habit of finishing the tea in one gulp, it is not to be recommended to anybody else. It can even be used as a dare.

When Asahina-san was happily preparing tea, Nagato continued sitting in her corner to read her book, ignoring everything happening around her. Koizumi had totally turned into an inspector. I can only stand beside the door like the Door God (3) while listening to Haruhi’s speech.

“Alright everybody. You all indeed possess the will to join the SOS Brigade. Although the student council’s continual disturbance prevented us from advertising on a major scale, I had known right along that willed first years would definitely appear. Indeed, the most important factor is to come here voluntarily. Seriously speaking, I had surveyed the first year classrooms

for a few times, but everytime I went, I did not see any difference between all the first years. But from now on, you people are now better than those first years that are not present here. Regarding this point you can have full confidence in me. But, just this is not enough. The reason for the existence of my Brigade is totally different from those cultural clubs you see everywhere else, and thus there must be a clear line drawn in the members recruited. I guess you people must have understood the history of the SOS Brigade well before coming here right?"

I guess it must be quite a headache to be experiencing such a questioning method. After all a question like this isn't very clear in the first place.

"Do you all have anything to ask?" Haruhi concluded.

I guess it could be described as unexpected, for among the first years', a burly-sized guy with short hair raised his hand.

"I have a question."

"Tell me about it."

"I am actually not too about sure what the club does. I only found it interesting, and so I came. Because since middle school I had heard a strange club existed here. Once I came to North High, upon discovering that it really does exist, I curiously popped by. Although my intentions are a bit strange, but is it okay even if it is so?"

Haruhi immediately stood up, giving a magnanimous smile at the guy while walking closer to him.

"Alright, you can go now."

"Huh?"

She grabbed the collar of the guy's shirt, dragging him away with the power of a mini hoist crane, opening the door and walking into the corridor before finally letting him go.

"What a waste, you failed right at the first stage of the Brigade entrance examinations. It must have been hard on you, please polish up your skills before coming by again."

She locked the poor guy out of the room before turning back.

"You all should never underestimate me. Me, as the leader of the SOS Brigade, carries the responsibility of saving the world by overloading it with fun. It is not an exaggeration even if I said that I had never thought of anything else other than that. So even when it comes to recruiting new members, I have no plans to make any concessions. Such problems left unsolved will gradually become bigger and cause decay."

The ones frozen are not limited to Asahina-san, but includes all first years and myself as well. Since when did the Brigade entrance examinations begin? These first years are really unlucky, they have not even tasted the tea made by Asahina-san yet, even though in paper cups, but they will be deported already.

"I will make it clear first, I am very strict when it comes to humor. First, vulgar topics and any acts of imitations are strictly rejected. Those who do extreme stuff to make people laugh are not to pass. They are to win by conversations only. I think the original theory for people laughing is……"

Why must we have a debate about laughter right now?

"Haruhi."

Because members below the assistant leader are not useful at all, I shall speak instead.

"What exactly is happening now? Isn't the person from just now too innocent? What exactly are these so-called Brigade entrance examinations? Is the person deported once they say something you do not like to hear?"

"I am not so high and mighty. I wanted to hear them saying that are more productive and with more gusto. Answering questions is something that is really simple, all you have to do is to use your brain and match the level. The factor that will gauge the standard would be by asking questions."

"So what you are trying to say is, the person from just now", I pointed in the direction of the door and continued "Questions like those are of too low a standard?"

"To put it honestly, that is true."

Haruhi returned to the leader's seat as if nothing has happened, faking a smile of a gentle female senior and sweeped through the first years that is now lacking one person, and said.

"So, any other questions?"

Needless to say, nobody opened their mouths again.

Maybe because they had cowered under the threat, when Asahina-san handed the tea to the various first years, the first years sat down quietly, remaining totally silent.

The only person speaking is Haruhi herself, she is just like a storyteller narrating the chronicles of Shinshaku Sanada Jyuu Yuushi (4), detailing the events that happened since the inception of the SOS Brigade. Because the contents are partly exaggerated, one does not have to trust it totally.

Because a person left, I dragged the vacated chair over and sat down beside Koizumi. The passive assistant leader seemed to be smiling at the grand total of eleven (is it really eleven?) first years, appraising them. I might as well do the same. After all Haruhi seemed to find no need for any self introduction and did not ask for any of their names, neither their birthday nor class. Just when I wanted to give them a nickname each according to their physical appearances, my line of sight fell very naturally on a particular person.

Let me clarify first. I meant no harm or designs. She is a girl.

Among all of the first years listening to Haruhi's one-man show, the girl seemed to be the only one who showed any sign of interest.

Hearing the repeated homeruns at the baseball match, she let out a low cheer; hearing the lone island killer mystery, she covered her mouth in shock, before regaining her smile after knowing the truth; hearing the exaggerated showdown against the Computer Research Society, she nodded her head repeatedly; hearing about Sakanaka-san's pet's incident, she again let out a small smile.

What a pure and innocent first year.

Calculating from the heights of their head, she seemed to be about the same height as Nagato. As for weight, she should be lighter than her. The hair seemed like it had been dried with a hairdryer after a perm, curling up like a smiley face at the ends. This can be taken as a unique feature. I don't know if it is because the uniform is not too fitting, the uniform seemed rather loose when taking a closer look.

The more I look at her, the more I feel subconsciously that I had seen this girl somewhere before. But, I am confident of never seeing her before at the same time. Not only those a year younger than me, but it doesn't even seem to be the case even when all the girls I had met since the past are included. In my mind, no matter how I tried to lengthen, shorten or straighten the hair, I still have no recollection of any kind. Could it be that she is the sister of one of my friends and thus looking a bit alike her brother? But I do not seem to know such a brother either. This mystery felt as bad as choking on spicy tofu.

I guess my gaze must not have been too polite, but the girl did not seem to notice, intently concentrating on listening to that one-man show. Her expressions kept changing, and looking at them is really interesting. That is a listener type of girl who would trust any lies, allowing the speaker to feel excited and satisfied.

"……This should be all. Our SOS Brigade thwarted the evil plan of the student council president, allowing the Literature Club to continue to exist. But they must be like those villains in the superhero shows, never learning their lessons, instead extend their dirty claws onto us, but those who will lose eventually are still them. SOS Brigade and I would never fall halfway, it has always been this way till now. And, indeed, this will not change in the future either!"

And that seemed to be the concluding sentence. Haruhi raised one of her hands and stopped for quite a while.

Just when I thought of carrying the cup of tea that has turned cold by now to another corner while some sightseeing, Haruhi started giving me weird eye signals, even winking at me once in a while later on. With her jaws opening and closing like that, what exactly is she trying to hint at?

Just when I am painstakingly thinking of a way to reply to Haruhi's signals, a tiny clapping sound entered my ears. Those clapping sounds from those palms that could be described as "small" are not very loud, and the owner of the palms is the first year girl I noticed just now.

Under that girl's lead, the rest of the first years suddenly realized and immediately started clapping as well, Asahina-san who was looking left and right also frantically started clapping.

Haruhi nodded her head, seemingly satisfied, at the same time giving me a look of guilt. This can only be blamed on you for not planning it properly in the first place, things like this must be told before the event.

Haruhi whizzed her hand up to stop the clapping.

"You all should have remembered the summary of the history of the SOS Brigade. I planned to get right into the second stage of the Brigade entrance examinations, but thinking that you people need some time to prepare as well, so the activities for today ends here. Those with guts, please come again tomorrow!"

At this moment, I noticed the armband on Haruhi's hand no longer read "leader" but "examiner".

"Alright, dismissed!"

After the first years left in quick paces, Haruhi turned on the computer while humming away, telling the outside world she is in a good mood while clicking around with the mouse.

Because Koizumi and I first split up to return the foldable chairs, when I came back and tried to talk to Haruhi, the computer had already booted up.

"What exactly are you planning to do?"

I asked the brain beneath the hairband of Haruhi, rhythmically moving to her movements while opening the usual foldable chair with my symbol on it.

Haruhi who skimmed me a glance gave me an expression of happiness, how irritating.

“Now that those first years who wanted to join the Brigade had gathered so much courage to come here, but none of your actions will entice them to join us. I think they may not come again.”

“Maybe.”

Haruhi continued touch typing quickly while saying the following.

“If the end result is that, I do not really mind. If they gave up just because of this, I do not want them to join us either. I only hoped to find some people with zeal, but just zeal is not enough, that first year have to pass all my Brigade entrance examinations as well. The obstacle course is not only long, but the obstacles are of a high level as well. After all the SOS Brigade of ours is not desperate enough to recruit those who came here to watch the show.”

Actually the reason for existence of this organization in the school is near to zero, and did not lack any members all along. Even if we look from the perspective of the student council, they do not want to see first years being sacrificed like an offering to the gods. And I am determined to prevent any situation when we increase the population density of this room exponentially. After all Asahina-san’s tea is not infinite. Preparing enough cups and water is already quite a time-wasting matter.

“Do you really plan to recruit new members?”

I looked at Haruhi, who is taking a whiff of Asahina-san’s newly made tea.

“Nagato, Asahina-san, and Koizumi too, were all forced into the Brigade by you. So I am wondering if you spotted any first years that just entered this school that would ignite your fetish for kidnapping?”

Break time walks should still be continuing at this moment of time, after all she seldom stays in class.

“Totally none.”

Haruhi said with a concluding tone.

“At least I haven’t spotted anyone who could be a mascot. But I suppose there should at least be some people with other special characteristics, and are those that I have never imagined. The kind that would give you a surprise. Not those you can see everywhere, but those with a super unique character traits! Also, if all of them are those commoners, won’t it be too uninteresting? If all of them are just moving towards a particular direction, wont it be too repetitive? Librarians wearing spectacles are introvert and quiet, short haired and active girl joining a sports club and things like that, it is just too boring.”

Isn’t that good? It beats having those with a strange character or a flaw in their characters. I, on the other hand, welcome anybody.

“I am totally uninterested in that kind of people. Although the many varieties of human character could be matched in different ways, But some thought should be paid into the matter before the matching. This is proof of how humans’ creativity are worsening with the progress of time!”

Such questions shouldn’t need you to worry about them. This doesn’t sound like something the you who dragged Asahina-san in back then would say.

“Isn’t Mikuru a unique talent? So of course it is alright.”

Even if you put it that way, humans had lived this way for so long till now, I am sure there would be some way to continue living in the future. Beats using all kinds of senseless creativity and end up making Earth fly off or something.

Haruhi revealed her teeth as if she is trying to bite the sides of her cup off.

“I wanted to look for people with more creativity or unique traits! It would be best if the first year would be the direct opposite of me, and inject some fresh air. It is because I wanted to confirm these traits that I thought of the Brigade entrance examinations. I think we can use the elimination method. Otherwise, I should be able to notice someone with a unique mental structure at first glance when we meet again.”

Haruhi put down her cup and put her hand back at the mouse.

“What I am making now is the Brigade entrance examination’s written paper. That is what I am doing last night as well. I always wanted to step out into the upcoming future with my own power! Kyon, the ancestors have got it right, we should always model after others and change ourselves. That is to say to never look down but look up beyond the grasp of our own hands. If humans do not have the “I have to get there” kind of determination, he or she will only keep dropping down!”

Such teachings that would cause calluses to grow in your ear could be told slowly to the ears of a horse. Besides, that is how Icarus died, from getting too near the sun. I always think that there should be a limit to everything. A common advice was to eat only 80% full isn’t it?

Asahina-san noticed that my teacup was empty and rushed forward with her teapot.

If Asahina-san, who had totally regarded herself as a waitress by now, were to work at a coffeeshop, I am afraid there would be a sharp rise in her salary. I am unable to control such imaginations of mine. Now that we think about it, where did her activity funds in the current time frame come from? Is it paid by the time travelers’ organization?

Because the population in the room decreased, the clubroom had also returned to normal and I could be slightly at ease. Other than Nagato who would never change her reading position no matter what and Haruhi whom I had just argued with just now, other members had returned to their usual seats with the relaxed atmosphere.

Sitting facing me, Koizumi took out yet another new board game and put it on the table.

“How about a round?”

Seems to be Classical Renju (5). Since it is rather boring here, I shall just treat this as some mind exercise and play a few rounds with you. But before that you must first tell me the rules.

“It is not much different from conventional Renju. You just have to remember the rules.”

I followed in the lead of Koizumi, putting pieces onto the board while learning how to play through experience.

We continued playing like this till it is time to leave school. Unconsciously, I had already won against Koizumi continuously for a few rounds by now. I don’t know if it is because I learn fast, or is it Koizumi that is plain weak. No matter what, these activities that does not help academics in any way continued for a while. At evening time, when Nagato closed her book, after waiting for Asahina-san to change out of her clothes, we left school.

How many first years would come knocking on the clubroom door tomorrow……

ß-6

No one came to the clubroom. Let's not talk about Haruhi who kept running around the school, seldom would Nagato not arrive by this time. Did she go to the Computer Research Society side? Koizumi had after all entered an elite class of sorts. Reaching the second year, it is only unavoidable that they have to pay more attention in the various aspects. What a troublesome class he entered. I heard that the form teacher of the ninth class is someone who is more interested in the prospects of the students rather than educating them. Koizumi seemed to have seriously thought about the issue as well. Or else he would never have chosen to enter such a class that is difficult to even catch your breath. If he had relied on the 'Organization' for help, I think he would have no problem entering any university he wanted. But Haruhi's choice of school will most likely be his anyway. As for me, a thought so long away should be entertained only then. A year and a half later I ought to have known my standard better. If we made a comparison on the basis of usual results, the chance of Koizumi and I entering the same school would be smaller than an ant hole. As for Haruhi…… Hmm, that is not something I have control over. Just let her go somewhere where she can express her own abilities.

Just when I am slowly reading Nagato's book, the person with the ability to beautify the world with all sorts of colours finally arrived.

"Ah, Kyon."

A walking anion that attracts anything around it, Asahina-san, carefully closed the door and put her bag down like a small squirrel who had just returned from picking acorns.

"I still thought I am a little late today, how unexpected that no one else had arrived yet. Where is Suzumiya-san?"

"I don't know where she went right after lessons. But it is spring now, maybe she had the desire to suddenly run a few rounds." Just like the flowers storing up their energy in winter for blossoming in spring, or the seeds of the Camellia. It is not like I did not have the feeling of wanting to run around, because the winter this time round seemed exceptionally long. In order to let Asahina-san change as soon as possible, I immediately stood up, but after taking just a step, I turned my head back, "Asahina-san".

"Hm?"

Facing the clothes rack with both of her hands extended out to take the waitress costume, Asahina-san let go of the costume. "Hm, I remember."

Changing to a serious expression, I continued while selecting my choice of words.

"What exactly do those bastards hope to achieve? I meant for coming back to this time frame. Looking at the state of things, it doesn't seem to be to observe Haruhi, I really cannot guess what is his purpose here."

I said this while feeling frustrated. Would it be alright if I tell her that the time traveler Fujiwara had came again? Regarding him calling himself Fujiwara and the Sasaki issue, which is more important? Should I say it at all?

"Um……"

Asahina-san pressed onto her lips with her fingers: "That person's motive is…… That, I am not told of. Hm, but I think he did not come here with the motive of doing anything bad. This is my personal opinion, since my superiors did not issue any orders, I guess this must be the case." She seemed to find it really hard to talk about the issue, I suppose she don't want to touch any of the classified information.

I recalled Asahina-san (big)'s side profile while saying: "Did that bastard come from a time that is related….. linked to our time frame?"

This is the question I cared the most about.

"It should be unquestionably linked."

Asahina-san continued while categorizing her thoughts: "That guy is the same as myself…… that……, he came to the time frame through a similar method. Using the TPDD to move time…… this……. Because it will leave a mark on the time plane……"

At this moment, she suddenly seemed to realize something: "Eh……? This matter, it is supposed to be classified information, and yet I am able to say it. Why?"

Although I wanted to ask as well, but I am mysteriously able to understand the concept behind it.

"Asahina-san, what is TPDD an acronym for? Can it be told?"

"Time Plane Destruction Device……. Eh?"

Asahina-san hurriedly used her hand to press against her mouth, at the same time widened her eyes.

"Liar…… it is supposed to be classified."

That is a phrase I knew of already. Because in Tanabata four years ago, I had heard about it from the mouth of Asahina-san (big). It must be since then that it became declassified.

"It seemed to contain some very dangerous words, what exactly do they mean?"

"That…… When we are crossing the time planes……"

I looked at the mouth of Asahina-san opening and closing, and wondered in my heart what fish is she exactly trying to imitate. At this moment……

"…… No, I can't say it. It seems not all of the restrictions had been lifted."

That is a more comforting tone. But I have the same thoughts as well. If one knows too much of knowledge exceeding human intelligence, the end result would definitely not be something good. Like if one hears something top secret about the country is leaked, that person will definitely be silenced or enter the wanted list of the Interpol. This had always been a fact.

I shrugged my shoulders, Asahina-san revealed a smile.

"Sorry, Kyon. This is all I can tell you for now. But, in the not-so-distant future, I can definitely tell you more. For the restrictions to be lifted just a little, it shows I had done something useful today."

Asahina-san revealed an expression like a dandelion that had successfully blossomed and repeated: "Definitely, in the not-so-distant future."

That is exactly the smile I wanted to keep out of others reach by locking the room. Did anyone capture her smiles in a photo? I really hope to be able to store up this current moment. But, I did not bring a camera, nor did I lock the door, much less hang up the latch. What I got was her smile.

I believe you, Asahina-san. Your hard work will definitely be rewarded. I am very clear about this point. I also knew what you did in order to grow up this way. Even though I do not know how many more years must the current Asahina-san in front of my eyes live before she can become Asahina-san (big), but to me, personally, I hope she does not grow up that quickly.

Because, the closer this senior who looks even younger than me gets to the elegance of Asahina-san (big), it meant that the time for our parting draws even nearer.

Since this is so, I hope that she can maintain her current state and thought process, and not develop a more selfish one. Everyone will miss you, especially Haruhi. Without anyone to hug on cold days, that person will definitely feel very regretful.

I guarded the door on the corridor while reading Nagato's book. At this moment, the female leader whose wind that her fingernails stir up are also powerful and influential, together with the assistant leader that acts like a free bodyguard cum aide, walked towards me shoulder to shoulder.

I saw the smile on Koizumi that looked like it really came from his heart and only had a single thought. What an untimely bastard. If you came alone we could have shared some secret talk. Now that you are sticking so close to Haruhi, it is totally impossible to talk now. I originally planned to share my thoughts on Tachibana Kyoko with him, but that guy would have probably heard it from somewhere by now. It may not even be surprising even if I told him Kimidori-san is working at the shop. It is very rare to find a person with so little excitement in his life.

“Is Mikuru still changing?” Although I do not know where she come back from, but Haruhi does not seem to be breathless. She seemed really happy when she walked towards me, and after pushing me aside, stuck her head in without even knocking on the door……

“Wa, ah, wait, wawa!”

Asahina-san produced cute screaming sounds.

“It is only your back zipper that is still undone, small things like this does not matter.”

Haruhi grabbed my shirt collar and dragged me into the clubroom. Haruhi’s description of Asahina-san is really very accurate. In her costume, Asahina-san had her back facing the window, with her hands frozen midway, stretching towards her back. This is everything that I saw. Haruhi is like a soccer ball kicked beyond the last line of defence, revolving around the back of Asahina-san, completing the last time in the changing process. But all she did is pull up the zipper and put up the hairband anyway.

I returned Nagato’s book back to its original position, turned my head and faced Koizumi with his head sticking in, appearing to be like a peeping tom observing the female bath at a higher platform in a public sauna, and asked: “What did Haruhi and you do before going here?”

“Nothing much.” Just like a seal swimming in the sea, Koizumi slid into the clubroom and closed the door without changing his expression of nonchalance:

“We only happened to meet on the walkway on the first level, we are definitely not carrying out some secret mission behind your back.”

“Really?” That would be good. Even if you didn’t call me along, I would not have any bad impression of you. But again, even if Haruhi wanted to go demand activity funds from the student council, I am sure you would have just followed along anyway. If it is really so it will be a headache, I don’t really want to be involved in any school conspiracy story.

“The student council president isn’t someone without any brains. Even if he wanted to find trouble he would have found a more convenient time.”

Koizumi sat on the permanent seat of his while facing Haruhi with a smile:

“For example, if we started doing some mass advertising to recruit members, it would immediately……”

“I did not have any plans of doing any major advertising……” Haruhi immediately responded from her desk.

“…… But we cannot just go without advertising. Putting a leg into the cultural clubs’ open house was because we felt we must at least do a bit of work. I guess it meant the so-called checking on your enemies? Just as I had expected, the student council president indeed pop by

and gave some cold advice. Just look at it yourselves, my checks against the enemy had succeeded."

If you are behaving this way just to see how the student council responds, I guess I can give you the title of Adviser. But again, didn't you just think of this? You are just commenting on an incident after it has passed.

"Does that matter? As long as the ending is the same, the process does not really matter. Working really hard to earn one hundred thousand yen, and picking up a one million yen note, returning it to the owner and then getting one-tenth of the amount as a sign of thanks has no difference at all."

It is way different. If working, one may have some luck with the opposite gender (Taniguchi Theory). What's more important is that it is not that easy to pick up a one million yen note. But the leader started rocking her chair and changed the topic.

"The recruitment exercise failed to work at all. But, while there are no interesting first years back then, they may be hiding somewhere else. There are also those who are wondering if they should come forward. But after the weekend, they should have found the answer to whatever thoughts they have."

Haruhi revealed her pearl-white teeth and took out a piece of paper.

"So I pasted this on the notice board of the school."

I took the piece of A4-sized paper. It had Haruhi's handwritten words on it: "Notice of holding of Brigade entrance examinations. Limited to first year students."

Hearing me say that, Asahina-san stopped preparing her tea and turned her head over, continuously blinking her eyes.

"Only limited to first years students?"

"Mikuru likes the fresh and active kind as well? We should eat sashimi that is caught on that day itself since it will be nicer. So of course we will be aiming for those newly-arrived and jumpy ones."

Exactly which fishery port is this?

"But, this……, there is no mention of the SOS Brigade here at all……"

Seeing how observant Asahina-san is, Haruhi replied smugly: "If we were to mention the SOS Brigade like this, the student council president and his gang will come over and make noise. This is just a concession, a concession. Although I am very unwilling, in order to beat the enemies, sometimes, taking a step back is important as well. We just have to mention the Brigade entrance part. After all, there are no other brigades in North High.

There is no cheerleading brigade in this school, and so we SOS Brigade are the only ones who are remotely linked to the word “brigade”. If there are any others it will be strange.

“No, Haruhi.” I asked a more fundamental question.

“What is the so-called examination? Don’t tell me you have to take an examination in order to enter?”

“Yes.”

Why did you give such a nonchalant expression?

“What exam is it?”

“That is a secret.”

“When is it held?”

“We can begin once those willing to join come by.”

I read the words on that paper again. Other than the “Notice of holding of Brigade entrance examinations” written in an extra large font, the only other line is “At Literature Club clubroom” that is written in a smaller font.

Haruhi turned her chair to the other side and looked out of the window: “Entrance, Literature Club, if these two words fail to make a first year understand, I don’t want that guy. Our SOS Brigade namesake had already spread among the cleverer ones. It is best to avoid those who don’t even know this. I don’t want those idiots who will come here and still ask me “What do we do here”?

You are one of those idiots yourself.

Asahina-san placed the kettle onto the cooker and looked afar:

“First years…… New members? ……” That tone of reminiscence, is it because she realized that she was already third year and would be leaving the school in less than a year’s time?

I passed the paper that would only make those not in the know become more confused back to Haruhi: “I hope there will be someone who really comes, those people who have a screw loose in their mind and want to join the SOS Brigade.”

“I do not want people with a screw loose. But, you are right, I hope some people would come. Or my painstakingly prepared Brigade entrance examinations would be wasted.”

Remembering that she had started working hard on the computer since last week, so this is what it is for? Let me take a look.

“No way.”

Haruhi stuck her tongue out at me: “This is after all a Brigade secret, not something a small fry like you can read. If you want to take a look, rise in your ranks.”

I did not want such a high rank in the first place, so I immediately gave up wanting to do so.

Haruhi, who turned on the computer, clicked on the mouse while continuing:

“But, in actual fact, the examination questions could not really be described as complete. Yesterday, while I was making that notice I thought about it. I was so serious that I even lost sleep over it. Because this is part of the responsibility of the Brigade leader after all. Although I just pasted the paper up and it is unlikely for someone to arrive so quickly, in case someone really does, we shall just do the practical examinations first.”

How many stages are there in actual fact? I meant that exam of yours.

“This is a secret as well.” I pray for the unfortunate bloke who has to go through all this while moving to sit facing Koizumi. Taking a closer look, he already had the board and the pieces ready.

“How about a round?”

I thought it would be Chinese chess again, but it seems to be Classical Renju. Since it is rather boring here, I shall just treat this as some mind exercise and play a few rounds with you. But before that you must first tell me the rules.

“It is not much different from conventional Renju. You just have to remember the rules.”

I followed Koizumi’s lead, putting pieces onto the board while learning how to play through experience.

We continued playing like this until it was time to leave school. Unconsciously, I had won against Koizumi continuously for a few rounds by now. Don’t know if it is because I learn fast, or is it Koizumi that is plain weak. No matter what, these activities that did not help academics in any way continued for a while.

Haruhi seemed to be entering something into the computer, Asahina-san was reading some coloured book on traditional tea making, and Koizumi and I continued playing. How boring.

“……?” Wait, this seems strange, it’s too abnormal.

I raised my head and took a look around the clubroom. After noticing the abnormality, both Haruhi and I shrieked.

“Huh?” “Eh?”

“Where’s Nagato?” “Where’s Yuki?”

“Ah?” Asahina-san sat up.

“Talk…… Talking about it, we indeed haven’t seen her. But as usual, I made tea for her too.” Beside the book I placed on the table lay Nagato’s tea cup. It had not been drank by anybody and already turned into cold green tea.

I heard a click sound. Taking a look, Koizumi kept the various pieces and closed the portable board game set. The eyebrows on that handsome face curled upwards. That was his only response. The assistant leader remained silent.

“Could she have gone to the Computer Research Society to help?”

Before I stood up, Haruhi had already hurried out of the clubroom like a rabbit. What exactly is with such a rush? It is just Nagato not at the clubroom……

Haruhi returned with a speed faster than a boomerang thrown by even the most skilled.

“They said she did not drop by.”

“Ah, th-that, could she be involved in a committee meeting or cleaning duties?”

Asahina-san offered a more cheerful proposition, but I have never heard of Nagato being appointed as the head of decorations, disciplinary mistress, head librarian or anything related to higher postings.

There is a saying that goes “things will straighten themselves out as we go on”. Isn’t this a very appropriate for times like this? But Haruhi beat everyone in taking out her phone and made a phone call.

“Tip-tap. Tip-tap” went the indoor shoes of Haruhi against the floor.

After a few seconds.

“…… Ah, Yuki?”

She seemed to have picked up the phone. I felt a bit more relaxed.

“What happened to you today?” After remaining silent for about ten seconds, Haruhi, with her ears pressed against the phone, had a sudden change in her facial expression.

“Eh, at home? ……It can’t be!” Haruhi’s mouth formed a “?” shape.

“Fever? You caught a flu? Did you go to the hospital? ……Oh, you didn’t? Medicine?”

Koizumi, Asahina-san and myself were looking at Haruhi at the same time.

Nagato had a fever?

Haruhi frowned with a heavy expression: “Yuki, you should have contacted us at times like this. We were so worried. Did you sleep well…… Ah, sorry, did I wake you up? …… Is it? So sorry. But…… Dummy…… How can you say this is nothing! I can tell just from your voice, are you fine?”

Haruhi continued talking loudly while bringing her bag nearer to herself.

“Yuki, it is all right now. You return to sleep first.” After that, Haruhi asked for some directions from Nagato before hanging up and putting the phone down.

She stood there, biting on her nails: “This is not something as simple as “oh no”. We should have noticed this earlier. Kyon, Yuki did not come to school today. Did you know that?” If I knew, I wouldn’t be passing my time aimlessly here, watching you prepare some lame notice or play Renju.

“What a bother. Yuki’s form teacher has some problem with his or her brain. He or she could have at least informed me. She is not fit to be a teacher if he or she is unable to do something as simple as contacting!”

Although you are only finding any random target to vent your anger on, this is the only time I agreed with Haruhi’s words of anger. Why wasn’t I informed?

It would be all right even if it wasn’t a teacher. They could have at least sent someone to inform Haruhi or myself.

Nagato, why didn’t you tell me that you will not be coming to school, which is actually quite an extraordinary event?

“Mikuru, change quickly!”

“Ah, yes, yes!”

“You must be fast!”

“Yes!”

Asahina-san started taking off her waitress costume without even waiting for Koizumi and I to take our leave.

Haruhi was so determined to leave school quickly that she seemed to find turning off the power switch of the computer a hindrance. Koizumi, and I as well, dashed out of the clubroom right after picking up our bags.

Although sounds of Haruhi assisting Asahina-san in changing could be heard from the other side of the partition wall, those two were totally silent, which was quite abnormal.

I must make use of this opportunity.

“Koizumi.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Did you know that Nagato would be taking sick leave today right from the start?”

“If I did, what would you do?”

“I would blame you for not mentioning it. According to the severity of the situation, there is a possibility of suspending you in the air as a punching bag.”

“I swear to god I did not know about it.”

Koizumi returned a smile that seemed somewhat flinty. Such that is under a transparent glass mask.

“Nagato-san is not one who would have a fever due to the violation of Earth’s viruses and bacteria into her immune system. She is not a martian from the past. I am afraid it is the same situation as last time.”

Images of chilly winter currents flooded my mind once again. A ski resort with snowflakes everywhere, an unreal mansion standing on the dark shadows of the snow mountain. An enclosed space. It is an experience that would make anyone dislike winter.

And Kuyoh. A doll-lookalike girl with hair resembling that of the waves in a violent ocean. The humanoid interface of the Sky Canopy Dominion.

I am wondering what exactly is her motive in appearing. She did not do anything yesterday. I thought that was because of the presence of Kimidori-san.

“Their invasion had started once again, those intelligent lifeforms existing beyond Earth, unrelated to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity. Obviously, their first target would naturally be Nagato, the strongest wall of defense of the SOS Brigade.”

Koizumi’s explanation had an unprecedented level of seriousness.

“Once they force Nagato into an inoperable state, those left would be us humans who regard Earth as our mothers. What a waste, the ‘Organization’ is effortless against these thought entities. Although the situation on the time travelers’ side is unknown, Asahina-san should not be able to do much right now. But……”

The only members left would be Haruhi and I. I am very clear of the fact that I am the most powerless. But for Haruhi……

Once she knows who Nagato fell sick for, Haruhi would probably torture that person until he or she has all her skin torn off before deciding to stop. Even if it involves turning the world topsy-turvy, she would definitely rescue Nagato. Now what? Should my trump card be used at this time?

"I don't think so." Koizumi's voice had exceeded calm and was progressing towards desolation. Is this some hallucination caused by my mental state of being?

"That may be their motive. Do you know that it is because the trump card can only be used once and not twice that it is effective. Any rash activity may just lead to the enemy's advantage. In addition, this can be said to be a better situation already. I do not have any problems now, Asahina-san too. If they decide to launch a full-fledged attack, we would not be able to move around freely at this time. There are no reports of Tachibana Kyoko taking any rash action. The same should apply to the time travelers' side. This must be a solo mission by the aliens not from the faction of the Integrated Data Sentient Entity. Since it is so, we should treat it with a more serious attitude as well."

Just when I had squeezed my reply up to my tongue, the door opened with a slam and Haruhi rushed out, holding onto the arms of Asahina-san. Her first sentence when she opened her mouth was: "Alright, let's get moving to Yuki's house!" She screamed in an expression close to scolding before running ahead of us.

Obviously……

Members who dare to oppose this leader of ours do not exist at all.

————To be continued in "The Astonishment of Suzumiya Haruhi"

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